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Oklahoma softball is about more than just winning championships

Plus +

MARK APPEL
No. 1 pick 2013 MLB Draft

JACKSON HOLLIDAY
No. 1 pick 2022 MLB Draft

TOMMY EDMAN
Cardinals' rising star

“

How can I best glorify the Lord? That’s by going and making disciples wherever I’m at.

PG. 14

PHOTOS BY LEAH MONTGOMERY

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AND TOO MANY BABIES BORN INTO POVERTY WON'T SURVIVE THEM.

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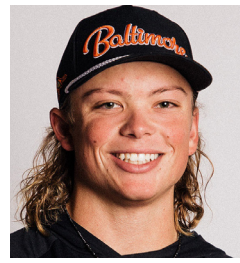

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BY THE NUMBERS

2

*Chiefs QB **Patrick Mahomes** is now a two-time Super Bowl champion, two-time Super Bowl MVP and two-time NFL MVP.*

$9.1 MIL

*Money donated via GoFundMe to The Chasing M's Foundation Community Toy Drive, which is run by Bills safety **Damar Hamlin**, who suffered a cardiac arrest on the field Jan. 2.*

113 MIL

*An estimated 113.06 million viewers tuned in to **Super Bowl LVII**, making it the second most-watched Super Bowl ever, behind only Super Bowl XLIX (Patriots over Seahawks).*

58

*Margin of victory in points for **Georgia**, which captured its second straight national title with a 65–7 victory over TCU. It's the largest margin of victory in college football bowl game history.*

AP Photo/Matt Slocum David J. Phillip Joshua Bessex, File Ashley Landis Manu Fernandez Alessandro Trovati Charlie Neibergall Rob Gray

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26

*Appearances in FIFA World Cup matches for the legendary **Lionel Messi**, the most all-time. He led Argentina to its third world title, and his first in the final World Cup match of his career.*

80

*Consecutive games in which Iowa junior guard **Caitlin Clark** scored in double figures (as of Feb. 21), an NCAA Division I record. Clark is a leading candidate for national player of the year.*

85

*World Cup alpine skiing wins (as of press time) for **Mikaela Shiffrin**, the most of any woman and just one shy of the all-time record set by Ingemar Stenmark. Shiffrin is only 27 years old.*

50

*Points for **Mac McClung** on his final attempt in the NBA Slam Dunk Contest, his third perfect score en route to taking the title — despite previously playing in only two career NBA games.*

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GOD IS FAITHFUL AND EVEN THOUGH HE KNOWS WHAT'S ON MY HEART I NEED TO SHARE IT WITH HIM BECAUSE IT DRAWS ME CLOSER TO HIM.
Clark Hunt
CHIEFS CEO

sports_spectrum As the owner of an NFL franchise that has now won two Super Bowls in four years, Clark Hunt knows that God has placed him in a position to glorify God and exemplify His love. #SuperBowlLVII

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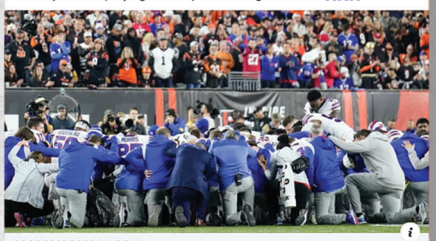
January 2 ·

Prayers flooded in for Damar Hamlin on social media after the Bills safety collapsed on the field Monday night.

Please join us in praying for complete healing for Hamlin 🙏🙏🙏



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Prayers flood in for Damar Hamlin after Bills safety collapses
Monday night's matchup between the Bills and Bengals was postpone...

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sports_spectrum and dorlovsky
Original audio

NFL LIVE
Damar Hamlin in critical condition after cardiac arrest Monday
Team said Hamlin was resuscitated and "heartbeat was restored on the field"

sports_spectrum ESPN's @dorlovsky praying for Damar Hamlin on NFL LIVE. Beautiful words of empathy, hope and love. #PrayForDamarHamlin

81,637 likes

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NEW POD! Alabama head coach @nate_oats joins us for his first long-form interview since a former player's arrest and how he's moving forward in leading his team with faith guiding him.

LISTEN!

sportsspectrum.com
Nate Oats podcast: Alabama men's hoops coach on tragedy, prayer
Nate Oats podcast: The Alabama men's basketball coach shares how God has guided him early in 2023 after unspeakable tragedy ...

6:04 PM · Jan 30, 2023 · **6,457** Views

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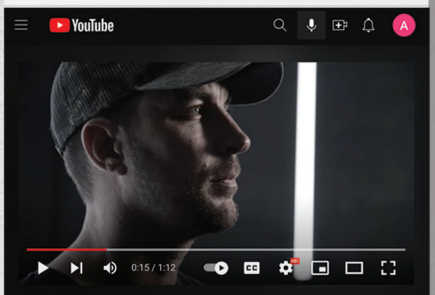

I ONCE WAS: MLB Pitcher Adam Wainwright

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I Once Was: MLB Pitcher Adam Wainwright

"For the first time in my life I cried out to God." Show more

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January 28 at 5:42 AM ·

"I was living my NBA life doing my own thing. God came and found me. Why? Because He loves me and desires to be in relationship with me... So I want people to gravitate toward finding out what a relationship with Christ is like."

— Orlando's Jonathan Isaac

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Orlando's Jonathan Isaac honors God in 1st NBA game in 904 days

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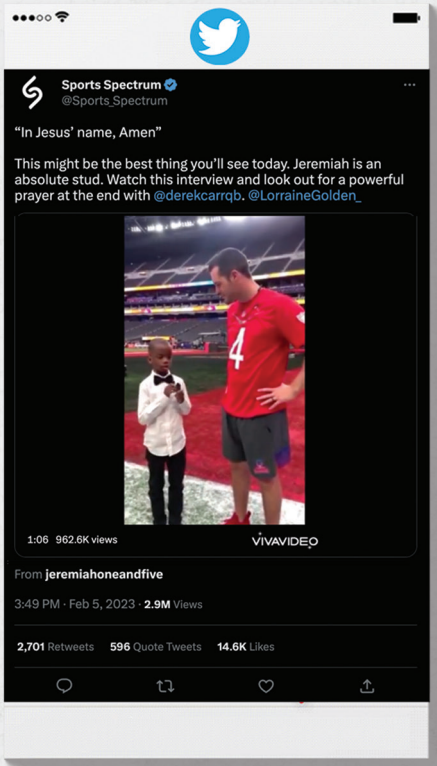
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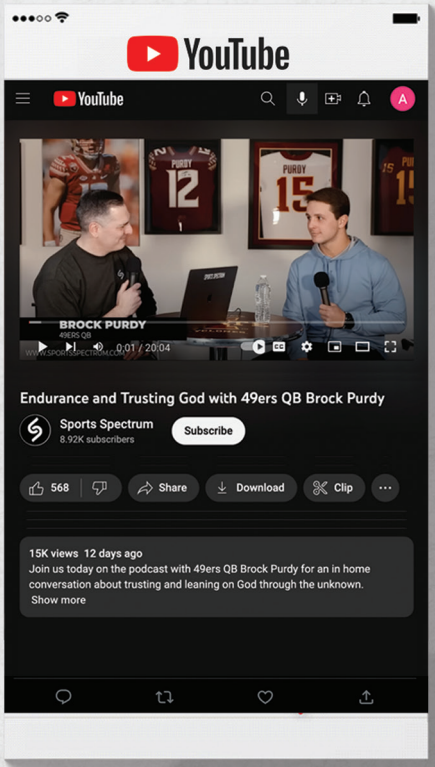

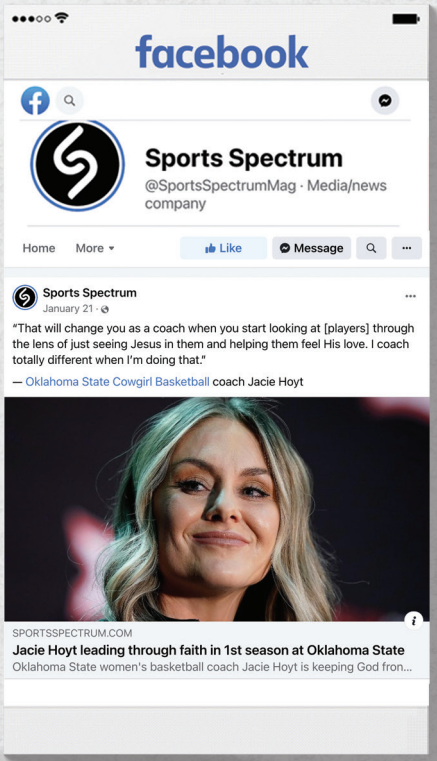
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January 21 ·
"That will change you as a coach when you start looking at [players] through the lens of just seeing Jesus in them and helping them feel His love. I coach totally different when I'm doing that."
— Oklahoma State Cowgirl Basketball coach Jacie Hoyt
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Jacie Hoyt leading through faith in 1st season at Oklahoma State
Oklahoma State women's basketball coach Jacie Hoyt is keeping God fron...

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BE WHAT GOD CALLED ME TO BE.
Jalen Hurts
EAGLES QB
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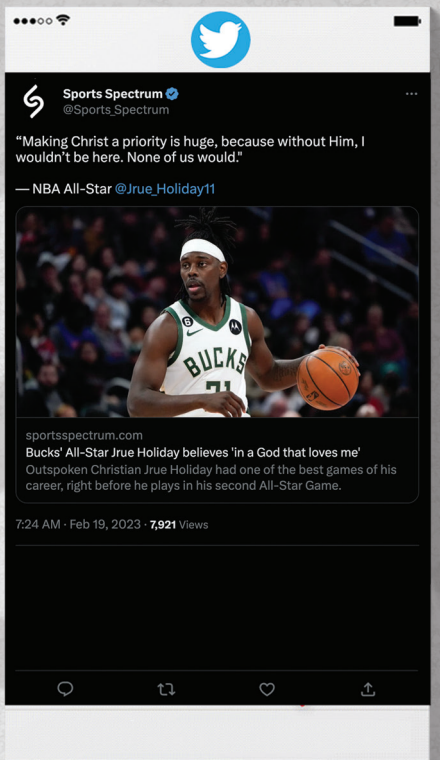
February 2 at 3:05 PM ·
Buffalo's Tage Thompson is 1 of 3 NHL players to rank in the top 5 in goals and points. He's also a "big believer in God."
"I'm able to use the platform I've been given to try and be a light to others to show what it means to be a follower of Christ."
SPORTSSPECTRUM.COM
Sabres All-Star Tage Thompson striving to 'be a light' for Christ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"Making Christ a priority is huge, because without Him, I wouldn't be here. None of us would."
— NBA All-Star @Jrue_Holiday11
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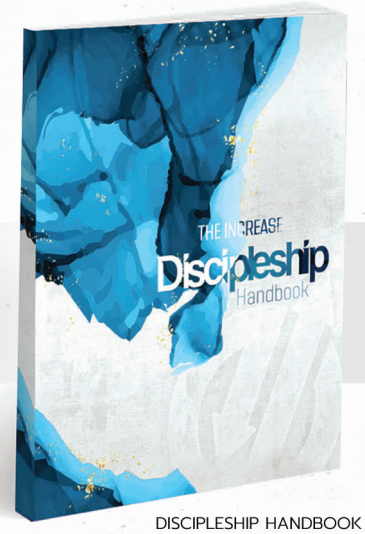
Bucks' All-Star Jrue Holiday believes 'in a God that loves me'
Outspoken Christian Jrue Holiday had one of the best games of his career, right before he plays in his second All-Star Game.
7:24 AM · Feb 19, 2023 · 7,921 Views

THE INCREASE STORE

Created and led by pro athletes, The Increase is a movement to see people everywhere have an Increase experience with Christ, as found in John 3:30: "He must increase, but I must decrease." Our new Increase Store aims to help by providing merchandise and gear to express faith in Christ, as well as books and Bible studies to encourage growth in Christ.



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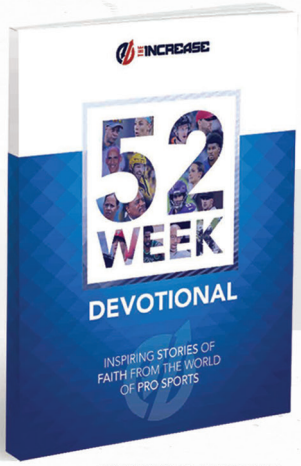

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CAITLYN SWEET

Caitlyn Sweet is a sophomore sprinter on the track and field team at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia. Known as the fastest girl in her class starting in third grade, she began running track in seventh grade, and since has earned the 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Distinguished Athlete Award, 2021 Avon Grove High School Spirit Award, and was a part of the team that set Shenandoah's 4x200-meter relay record.

"YOU ARE ALTOGETHER BEAUTIFUL, MY DARLING; THERE IS NO FLAW IN YOU."
— Song of Solomon 4:7

HOW HAS YOUR FAITH IMPACTED THE WAY YOU PLAY YOUR SPORT?

When I started in middle school, I was running for all of the wrong reasons. I was a selfish athlete, only competing to beat the girls I was racing against. Now, I run for Him. Without Jesus Christ blessing me with the ability to run fast, I would not be able to compete at the collegiate level. It is only because of Him that I am where I am today as an athlete and a person. As a reminder of who I am competing for, I have a "faith" tattoo on my right wrist, the last thing I see when I am in the starting blocks.

HOW HAS YOUR FAITH BEEN CHALLENGED AT SCHOOL?

It was difficult as an incoming freshman to find people who had similar beliefs. When I was a senior in high school, I promised I would start a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) huddle if there wasn't one on campus wherever I decided to go. Shenandoah didn't have one, so I made it a goal to get one approved and started by the end of my freshman year. At times I felt like I was the only Christian on campus, but I wanted to not only grow in my faith but also shine the light of Jesus onto my peers.

HOW HAS GOD REVEALED HIMSELF TO YOU?

My sister recently had a non-emergency appendectomy, and within a week she experienced severe abdominal pain and was rushed to an emergency room. It turned out she received an injury during the appendectomy, so a second surgery was required to repair the damage to her small intestine. Her second surgery was a success, but her recovery took 12 days. I'll admit, I constantly was asking God, "Why her? Why my family?" But He revealed Himself by never letting go of her hand through the battle. He was right by my family's side and never gave up on us, even when I was starting to give up on Him.

IN WHAT WAYS HAS A COACH INFLUENCED YOU?

I actually had a cheerleading coach who verbally abused me when I was 10 years old. Although he was a bully to me at a very impressionable age, if it wasn't for his actions, I would not have started to truly come to know Christ. I dreaded going to practice, but as I grew up, I started to thank him for how he treated me. He not only made me a stronger version of myself, but he also drew me closer to my Savior.

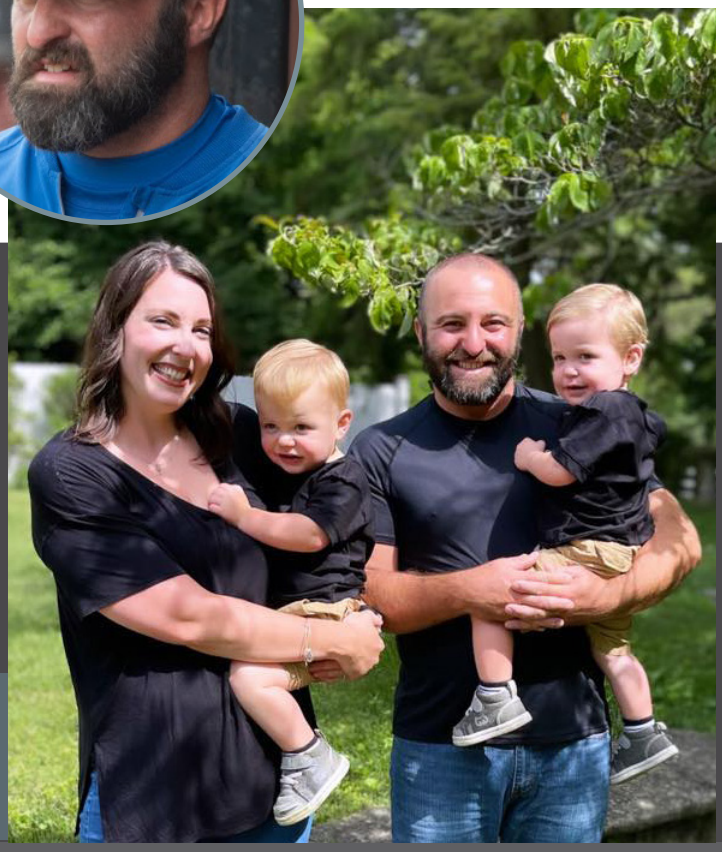
WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE AND WHY?

Song of Solomon 4:7 (see above). When I first started college, I struggled with accepting who I was. It took me some time to learn that my flaws make me my most authentic self. This verse has guided me through the rough patches and has reminded me that God has created me in His image. I may not be perfect in my eyes, but I am in His.

Photos courtesy of Caitlyn Sweet

If you would like to nominate an athlete or coach to be featured,

NICK CALHOUN



Nick Calhoun is the head baseball coach and athletic director at the University of South Carolina-Lancaster, where he's in his fifth season as the baseball coach and third as the AD. He previously coached in the Cape Cod League, the West Coast League, at Bethany College (West Virginia), at Salem International University (WV), and at Murray State College (Tishomingo, Oklahoma), where helped lead the Aggies to the 2013 NJCAA Division II national championship.

"THE CRUCIBLE FOR SILVER AND THE FURNACE FOR GOLD, BUT PEOPLE ARE TESTED BY THEIR PRAISE."

— Proverbs 27:21

HOW DOES YOUR FAITH IN CHRIST IMPACT HOW YOU COACH?

My faith in Christ has allowed me to operate with a higher emotional intelligence when it comes to dealing with players. It has provided me with the patience and ability to step back and look at others with empathy, as opposed to looking at players as a means to an end.

HOW HAS YOUR FAITH BEEN CHALLENGED AS A COACH?

I officially gave myself to Christ in 2019 (a long story) and it has been challenged multiple times in multiple ways since. I used to occasionally read a verse out of the Bible to my team before practice and talk about its significance, and *every* time I did that, we would follow with a poor practice. Also, at times when I was a little more vocal with my faith, things that were out of my control would happen that would seem like they were there to slow me down or make my life difficult. It really would discourage me at times, but I learned that if I continued to lean even harder into my faith, God would lead me through the hardship, or something even better than I anticipated would happen. I've learned that just because I am a believer, it doesn't mean life is going to get any easier, but God is ever present in my life and I should lean as much as I can into Him and He will help me through any situation.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR YOUNG ATHLETES TODAY?

I think the biggest challenge student-athletes face today is figuring out what aspects of athletic programs and coaching staffs are genuine, and what things are done to just amplify the program with no substance behind it.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR PLAYERS REMEMBER ABOUT YOU?

This is something I have asked myself from time to time and wonder if I am having the impact I strive to have with my players. You never know what they are going to remember about you or what you say. But I hope my players remember me as someone who cared about them, and someone who took a genuine interest in their lives, and would do anything to help them, on or off the field.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE AND WHY?

That is a tough one. I don't have a particular favorite one because there is a verse for every kind of hardship you face, but one I think holds true in all situations is Proverbs 27:21 (see above). How you act and behave before you earn man's praise and afterwards often seems to reveal a person's true character. The first time I read that proverb it kind of struck me and didn't leave my mind for a while. I often pray that God keeps me grounded in times of praise from others because it is fleeting, whereas God's love is not.

Photos courtesy of Nick Calhoun

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BILLS QB JOSH ALLEN DESCRIBES HIS 'SPIRITUAL AWAKENING' IN EVENTS SURROUNDING DAMAR HAMLIN

BY JON ACKERMAN
PUBLISHED JAN. 13, 2023

Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen, Jan. 8, 2023. (AP Photo/Jeffrey T. Barnes)

Immediately following the Buffalo Bills victory over the New England Patriots on Jan. 8 — the Bills' first game since safety Damar Hamlin collapsed on the field, and a game that incredibly began with a 96-yard kick-return touchdown for the Bills — quarterback Josh Allen could only describe the remarkable day as "spiritual."

"I was just going around to my teammates saying, 'God's real.' You can't draw that one up, write that one up any better," he said in his postgame press conference.

Allen expanded on his thoughts this week when talking to NFL media personality Kyle Brandt.

"I said this in my press conference the other day, [there was] just kind of a spiritual awakening really for me, and I know for a lot of other people that maybe didn't have the strongest belief, or wasn't one of the biggest, strongest Christian followers," Allen said on "Kyle Brandt's Basement."

"To see what's transpired here, it's a crazy, crazy feeling. It's something I've never felt before. It's something I know a lot of my teammates have never felt before. You can't really do anything but accept it and lean on your brothers and share that moment with them.

"That kickoff return was pretty crazy, too. So there's a lot of things that went on and a lot of eye-opening situations that have stumbled upon us, or we've stumbled upon them. I think it's been crazy, it's been not fun, but at the same time it's been very validating."

Brandt then replayed Allen's quote about God from the press conference, to which Allen responded, "I've never been struck like that before from a play, from an experience, from an emotion, it's never hit me that way before. And look, I'll be the first to admit, I haven't been the most devoted Christ-follower in my life, and I've had my different beliefs and thoughts and ideas and stuff like that, but something got hold of me there, and it was extremely powerful, [something] that I couldn't deny."

> ***"I'll be the first to admit, I haven't been the most devoted Christ-follower in my life, and I've had my different beliefs and thoughts and ideas and stuff like that, but something got hold of me there, and it was extremely powerful." – Josh Allen***

Allen then opened up a bit about his upbringing in Firebaugh, California, which sits between Fresno and the Bay Area. He said his family went to a Methodist church on many Sundays, but he wanted to leave as soon as possible so he could get home and watch football, specifically the San Francisco 49ers. He said he hasn't been to church much since he's become an adult.

"It's been so long since I've actually been to church. I went this last offseason one or two times, but not as much as maybe I should," he said. "But again, I think this conversation that we're having right now, we've had all these conversations in our locker room. It's been really cool to see how guys have been moved and touched by this whole instance and situation, and to see the country come together in support for Damar and maybe having those talks."

Allen immediately took to Twitter to ask for prayer the night Hamlin went down, and said he's been grateful for the leadership head coach Sean McDermott has shown during this tough time…

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OKLAHOMA boasts the most dominant softball program in the country, claiming five of the past nine national championships. But that's not what the head coach or many of the players want to talk about. They'd rather tell you about the work Christ is doing in them and their program.

BY JON ACKERMAN

To watch the full interviews with the Oklahoma players and coaches, check out Sports Spectrum on YouTube.

Photos by Leah Montgomery

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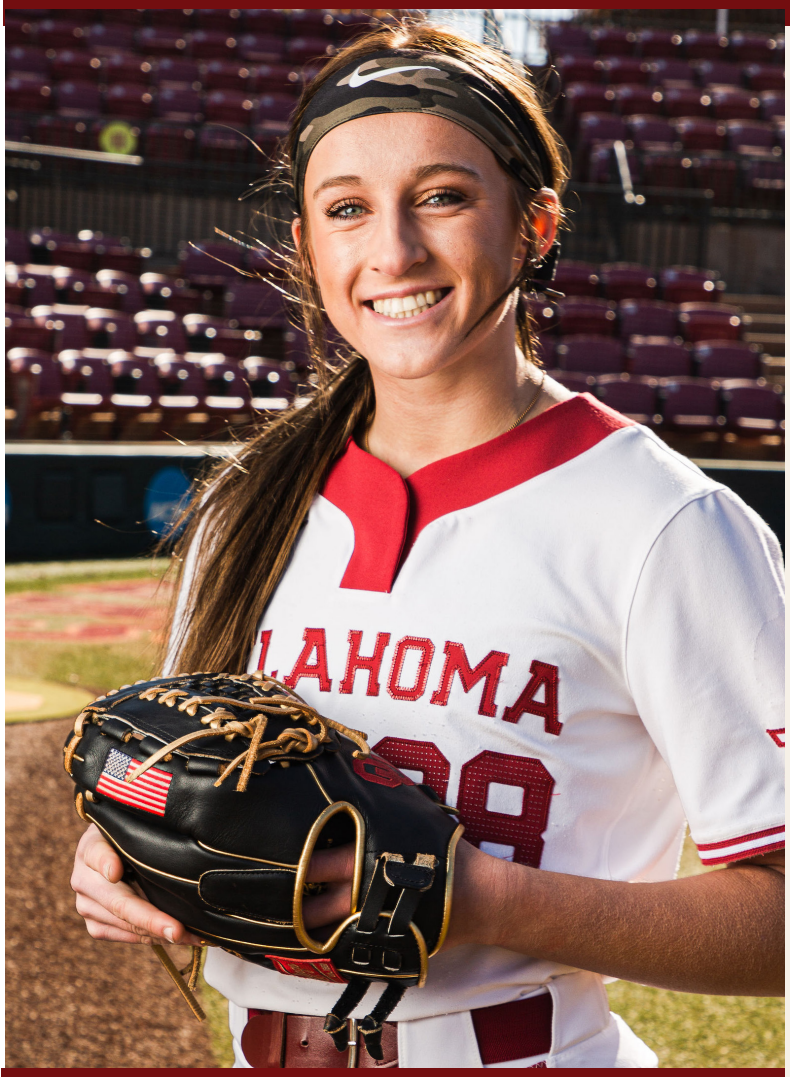

JORDY BAHL, Sophomore Pitcher
2022 stats: 22–1, 1.09 ERA, 205 strikeouts
2022 1st Team All–American
2022 National Freshman of the Year
2023 Preseason 1st Team All–American

> **I just knew it was a place where I would be comfortable in expressing and growing in my faith.**
>
> *Jordy Bahl*

THE ELITE PROSPECT

Jordy Bahl could have selected any elite program she wanted. That's a privilege that comes with Gatorade National Softball Player of the Year honors, as well as being the consensus No. 1 prospect in your class. Born and raised in Papillion, Nebraska, she originally committed to the big state school 45 minutes away when she was 14, jumping at the chance to play Division-I softball close to home. But as she piled up high school and travel ball accolades, Bahl reopened her recruiting, wanting to see what other opportunities were available.

Perennial powers like Oregon, Washington, Texas and Florida showed interest. At the top of her list, however, was Oklahoma.

"When I was 8 years old, that was nothing I ever really thought would happen. OU was a dream school growing up, but it's nothing I ever really saw becoming a reality, to be honest," Bahl says.

So when legendary Sooners head coach Patty Gasso — with four national championships (at the time) to her credit — invited Bahl to Norman to visit the campus in September 2020, the fiery right-handed pitcher immediately took her up. She also planned to take trips to the other schools — but there was no need after visiting OU. On the Sunday morning of her visit, Bahl and her family attended Summit Church in Norman with some girls on the team.

"Authentic. You could just tell it wasn't the first time they'd all gone to church together," Bahl told Sports Spectrum. "Coach [Gasso] and her husband were there, and you could tell the way they interacted with the pastor, it was not their first time."

During the sermon, Bahl felt God telling her, "This is it."

"I just knew it was a place where I would be comfortable in expressing and growing in my faith," she says.

Bahl recalls this experience while sitting inside the team facility at Marita Hynes Field on a late fall afternoon. The wall behind her boasts a white plaque proclaiming the program mantra, "Championship Mindset," along with images of the six national championship trophies it has now claimed. The years of those titles — 2000, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2021, 2022 — are highlighted in gold across the painted brick wall, which features a collage of crimson-hued images from all those championship teams.

The Sooners may not be the winningest college softball program in history (yet), but they are certainly the most elite over the past decade. They've won five of the past nine NCAA championships, and have appeared in seven of the past 10 championship series. OU's six titles rank third all time behind only UCLA (which owns 12 and last won it all in 2019) and Arizona (which owns eight and last won in 2007). The 2022 OU team won 59 games and only suffered three losses, the fewest defeats for a championship team since 1994.

The run of success will soon be rewarded with a new stadium. In September 2022, OU broke ground on a $42 million softball facility that will be named Love's Field. Nearly 900 donors have contributed to the project, including $12 million from Love's Travel Stops, which secured the naming rights.

All this is why Oklahoma was Bahl's — and so many others' — dream school. But it's not just about softball, which

is precisely what makes OU so different and dominant.

"People would think the exact opposite, being a successful team like we are," Bahl says. "They would think that it's live-breathe-die softball for us. But while we put in the work and we put in the hours to be successful here at the field, that's not the No. 1 priority in a lot of our lives. I think that really shines through, especially in big moments when you would think the pressure's on us. A lot of us tell each other, 'Hey, the end's already written, so we just have to go out and ball and what happens, happens.' We [are] able to accept whatever happens."

The unique culture is why Bahl never visited another school after her time in Norman.

"Everything felt so authentic," she says. "A lot of times in the recruiting process, you don't know what's the red carpet being rolled out and what is just real and genuine. But [here], I was around the team a lot, so much time around the girls and just feeling the genuine love they have for each other."

Bahl sensed God was behind it. Early on at Papillion-LaVista High School, when she was already being recruited by Division-I programs, she struggled with seeing herself as more than an athlete. But she got connected to her school's Fellowship of Christian Athletes program, which helped her begin seeking a personal relationship with Christ. Being at that point in her faith journey made OU even more attractive, as she learned more about how Gasso led the program with her faith in front. Yet, Bahl didn't truly grasp how special the culture is until she officially became a part of it.

"Seeing upperclassmen and women like Grace Lyons, who have taken [sharing their faith] to the absolute next level, has only inspired girls on our team to do that. I understood [faith was a big part of the program], but not fully until I got here," she says.

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THE TRANSFER TREASURE

Alyssa Brito grew up in the softball hotbed of Southern California. She was raised in a Christian household, but was never too involved in church, largely because many of her weekends were taken up by softball. She became a three-time California all-state selection and rated among the nation's top 35 prospects by numerous recruiting services. She chose Oregon, which made appearances in the Women's College World Series (comprising the final eight teams of the NCAA Tournament) five times from 2012 to 2018.

Brito as a freshman infielder played well for the Ducks, hitting 10 home runs and 31 RBIs, and earned Pac-12 All-Freshman, Pac-12 All-Defense and second-team All-Pac-12 honors. But away from the game she was lonely.

"It was kind of a very alone time in my journey at that point," she says. "I was really trying to get guidance from people and there just wasn't a lot of people there that could really, truly help dive me into my faith."

She felt God guiding her to make a change, so she chose to transfer after that freshman season in 2021. When Coach Gasso — seeking a player who could play multiple positions and hit for power — saw Brito's name in the transfer portal, she invited her to campus. Brito jumped at the chance to visit the reigning national champions.

"Throughout my visit there were just a ton of family-oriented things," Brito says. "Like, you could just see that it was beyond softball and the winning aspect of it. It was more about being a family."

Brito played on the same travel ball team as OU's Tiare Jennings and Kinzie Hansen, so she was able to get even better insight into the team culture. They told Brito many of them go to church together, and explained to her what the "fours" meant during their championship run. As a nod to a group study during OU team chapels, most of the players held up four fingers as they celebrated wins at the World Series to proclaim they were playing "4 God and 4 others."

Faith wasn't a huge focus in Brito's conversations with Gasso, but since she was intrigued by the faith component she'd heard about, she inquired of the coach. Gasso, as she

ALYSSA BRITO, Junior Utility Player
2022 stats: .368 AVG., 14 HRs, 46 RBIs, .921 FLD%
2022 2nd Team All–Big 12

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does with all recruits who ask, shared about her personal faith and how she allows team chaplain Sarah Roberts to operate freely within the program.

Brito left Norman with an offer to join the storied program, and couldn't believe it.

"I was in the car with my dad and he was like, 'Wow, Patty Gasso wants you to be a part of the program.' It was just a very surreal moment because I never thought I'd get to that point. Early on in my career, I didn't think I could play for an OU. And then for that opportunity to come, it was very full circle for me because I've always wanted to play for her," Brito says.

On this fall afternoon, Brito admits she was really coming to OU more for the winning aspect. And during her first semester on campus, she found herself caught up in results, outcomes and trying to fit in on this national championship team. But it wasn't long before she learned the program had so much more to offer.

"People like Lyons, [Rylie] Boone, super great influences for me," Brito says. "They've definitely challenged me to just step into that comfort zone of trusting the Lord."

On Nov. 9, 2021, Brito says she devoted her life to Christ. On Feb. 26, 2022, she publicly expressed her faith by being baptized. Boone and Lyons did the honors in a hotel pool in Cathedral City, California, where the team was playing in the annual Mary Nutter Classic. It wasn't the first time the majority of the players and staff gathered for a player's baptism. Some have even taken place in Coach Gasso's backyard pool.

Now, Brito believes God brought her to OU for a bigger reason than just softball.

"I feel like I have two versions of myself from then [at Oregon] and now," she says. "My trust in God has grown so much more and I feel like that's shaped me as a person more now, knowing that I can just be who I am on the field and off the field. And I just feel like getting the opportunity to be different and bring attention to the Kingdom and have conversations about Christ, I think that's definitely made me feel more confident in my faith. … I've grown so much more than I would have ever thought."

> **Getting the opportunity to be different and bring attention to the Kingdom and have conversations about Christ, I think that's definitely made me feel more confident in my faith.**
>
> *Alyssa Brito*

RYLIE BOONE, Senior Outfielder
2022 stats: .408 AVG., .439 OB%, 27 RBIs, .946 FLD%
2022 WCWS All–Tournament Team
2023 Preseason 3rd Team All–American

THE HOMEGROWN GIRL

Growing up in the softball scene in Owasso, Oklahoma, about a two-hour drive northeast of Norman, Rylie Boone had OU as her dream school as soon as she realized she could play this game at the collegiate level. And Coach Gasso first discovered this local kid when Boone was in sixth grade.

By the time the speedy left-handed outfielder reached eighth grade, Gasso had led the Sooners to their second national title. That was exactly the type of program Boone wanted to be a part of. As an "immature" middle-schooler, she didn't give much thought to other aspects like team culture or coaching style. She just knew she wanted to win, so she verbally committed to OU before she even got to high school.

OU's third and fourth national championships were collected by the time Boone could officially sign with the Sooners in 2018, thus establishing it as one of the country's premier programs. That further cemented Boone's desire to join.

"I chose OU because it felt like home and they know how to win," Boone said in a statement announcing her commitment. "I feel like I can reach my best potential there. I want to win a national championship."

An important part of winning championships is establishing a healthy team culture. For OU, that means leaving softball at the field and not taking it home. "[Gasso] doesn't want softball to be our life," Boone says.

Some of that culture is created during spontaneous volleyball games at a teammate's house. Or while attending Sooner football games together. And many of them get together for Bible study groups, FCA huddles and/or going

to church. Coach Gasso doesn't force any of this on any of her players, but bonding and friendships occur year after year within the program. It often leads to discipleship.

"When I got here, I didn't really know about Jesus," Boone says. "And then I met Grace Lyons. She kind of mentored me and discipled me, and I think that's when I started to get into my faith. … I was very curious and I had a lot of questions; I guess you could say doubtful questions. And she would take me step by step, always telling me, 'No questions are dumb.'"

Early on, it was a "reward thing" for Boone. After starting the first four games of her career, she suffered a knee injury that kept her out the rest of the season. Her prayers during that time were along the lines of, "Heal me and then I'll praise You."

Then everyone's season was cut short with the onset of the COVID pandemic. Boone went home and was away from the community she was growing into at OU, but that drove her to dive into her faith like never before. She watched a lot of sermons, read more of the Bible, and reached out to Lyons any time she had questions.

"I'm asking Grace, like, 'Why are the Israelites doing that? I don't understand,'" Boone says. "She's basically saying, 'That's how humans are. We're literally just like them.' I had a lot of alone time, I had a lot of quiet time, and I took the focus off of softball and I just focused all on God."

During one particular online sermon, while watching in her apartment in Owasso, Boone began crying uncontrollably.

"I think it was the realization that I'm not alone, and I'm a child of God. I laid my shame, my past, all that type of stuff at His feet. I couldn't control my crying, and I was asking God, 'Why am I crying? Why do I feel this way?' And that's when I was just like, 'I believe. It's real.'"

> **"I laid my shame, my past, all that type of stuff at His feet. I couldn't control my crying, and I was asking God, 'Why am I crying? Why do I feel this way?' And that's when I was just like, 'I believe. It's real.'**
>
> ***Rylie Boone***

Boone is now considered by Roberts, the chaplain, to be one of the spiritual leaders on the team — a claim supported by Boone's presence in the pool for Brito's baptism, and the fact that she's now helping other teammates grasp the Bible. She's also interested in getting into ministry after her playing days come to an end.

Little did she know when she signed with OU, so focused on winning championships — which she has been able to do in helping bring the program's fifth and sixth titles back to campus — that she'd actually be taken on a faith journey that would change the course of her life. Boone is asked on this autumn afternoon if, upon arriving at OU, she could have ever imagined the spiritual role she finds herself in as a senior.

"No shot. No. Not at all," she says, adding, "I think the culture of this program has a lot to do with who I am today as a person."

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GRACE LYONS, Redshirt Senior Shortstop
2022 stats: .401 AVG., 23 HRs, 70 RBIs, .960 FLD%
2022 1st Team All–American
2022 USA Softball National Team
2023 Preseason 1st Team All–American

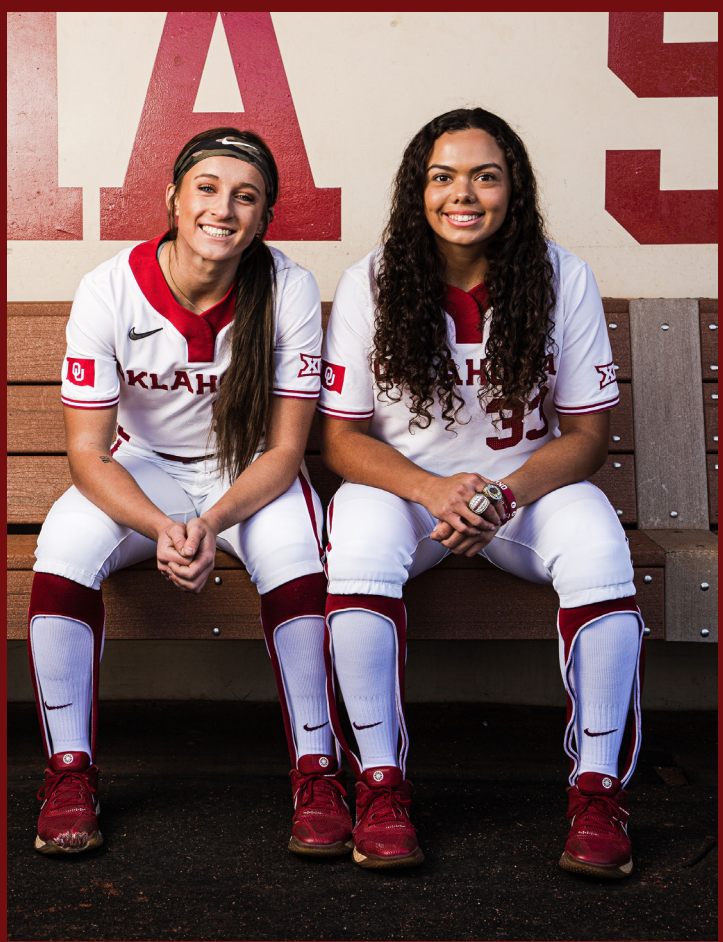
THE SPIRITUAL LEADER

To anyone familiar with the Oklahoma softball program, it's not surprising in the least that Bahl, Brito and Boone all mention Lyons as being a spiritual influence to them. Numerous other teammates would say the same. In fact, some *opponents* might even mention her impact on them. Early last season, OU players began asking the other teams after games if they'd like to join them in prayer around the pitcher's circle. It was something Lyons and Lynnsie Elam brainstormed in the back of the team bus after a game.

"One of us was like, 'Why don't we try to invite the other team to pray after the game with us and just see how that works?'" Lyons says. "And we're like, 'They could ignore us or just not want anything to do with it.' But we talked about it and then we asked the team, 'Hey, should we try to do this?' And they were all on board with it."

Coach Gasso absolutely loved that her players were taking the bold step to pray with opponents, but also noted they were on quite the winning streak when the prayers began. She knew they'd lose at some point — would her players

AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki



still reach out? After 38 victories to start the season (part of a 40-game win streak, the third longest in Division-I history), OU finally lost at Texas, the Longhorns' first win over the Sooners since 2014.

In "one of the greatest moments" Gasso says she has witnessed, the OU players once again walked over and invited their "rivals" to pray.

"Being at a public university, the coaches can't really have much of a say with [faith matters]. So it's been really cool to be challenged as a spiritual leader," Lyons says. "And that all started as a freshman, to where I felt like the Lord had called me to be more than someone just taking in, but I needed to go pour out."

Lyons continues, "I look at softball as kind of my mission field right now. That's what I'm doing right now; that's where I'm at. And how can I best glorify the Lord? That's by going and making disciples wherever I'm at. … I love to encourage other believers. That's kind of my sweet spot."

That's led Lyons to launch The Player's Conference, an annual three-day event designed to build a Christ-centered community within college softball. The first gathering met in Phoenix in 2021, near Lyons' hometown of Peoria, and she hosted the second conference in Norman last summer. She knows that what she has within OU is special, and desires to spread it around the entire sport.

Lyons is a respected voice within softball because she's also a star shortstop. Entering the 2023 season, she'd started all but one of her 209 career games (Gasso gave her a break that one game to rest a tweaked ankle). In 2022, she boasted a .401 batting average and a .960 fielding percentage, was named a first-team All-American and the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year, and was called up to the USA Softball women's national team.

Thanks to COVID, she got an extra year of collegiate eligibility, and she entered her super-senior season focused on the legacy she's going to leave behind. But she's not concerned with what might be said about her as a player. Rather, she wants to leave this unmatched, faith-focused program in good hands.

As players like Shay Knighten, Fale Aviu and Sydney Romero included a young Lyons in Bible study groups and church outings, making her comfortable with sharing her growing faith, Lyons wants that legacy to continue after her.

With Boone, Brito, Bahl and others, she's confident the program will be in good hands. "We've got a lot of great characters. There's so many people who are seeking after the Lord," she says.

As long as Gasso is at the helm, they won't receive pushback from coaches on team prayers, team Bible studies, team chapels, or anything of the like. Gasso won't lead any of those activities, and she makes sure all the players are aware they're completely optional. But she'll often attend and always support the players however she can.

"I've brought up things to Coach, ideas that I have, speakers that we want to bring in, and she's all about it," Lyons says. "So if I go to Coach about it, she's going to listen to a player about what the players want. And we're blessed enough to have multiple Christians on the team. I know other schools, there's only one or two, and it's really hard to get that movement going as a group and to unite under that mission.

"But thankfully, we have a bunch of Christians on the team, and that goes to Coach recruiting just awesome people who she sees something different in. … Coach allowing me to pray and invite the other team, and allowing us to have chapels available, that's a rare thing for a coach to even be OK with. I've known people who'd lose their job and get persecuted for being a Christian."

> **"I look at softball as kind of my mission field right now. That's what I'm doing right now; that's where I'm at. And how can I best glorify the Lord? That's by going and making disciples wherever I'm at.**
>
> *Grace Lyons*

> **"The Lord kind of woke me up and was like, 'You're doing this wrong. You're not here to win games. You're here to open the door, here to win souls. You open the door, let them in. I'll take over from there.'**
>
> *Patty Gasso*

PATTY GASSO, Head Coach
1,395–344–2 (.801) in 28 seasons at OU
6 National Championships
15 WCWS Appearances
27 Postseason Appearances
NFCA Hall of Fame

AP Photo/Alonzo Adams

> **Those championships are orchestrated by Him as well, because I've got some very brave athletes who stand on the biggest platform and are not afraid to share their faith. And the Lord is like, 'Right on! Let's win you another one so you'll do it again!'**
>
> *Patty Gasso*

THE ARCHITECT

So how did this happen? How did a "football school" in middle America develop a dominant softball program heavy on Christ-followers? And how did that team go from playing in a public park to a softball-exclusive stadium in 1998, to a $42 million facility set to open in 2024?

It certainly wasn't Coach Gasso's vision when she was hired by OU in October 1994. She began coaching four years earlier at Long Beach City College, and never wanted to leave her home state, but knew a Division-I program in California wouldn't hire a junior college coach. So she hoped a strong stint in Oklahoma would propel her to a top school back west.

Her initial goal was to "put together a competitive team, not even a winning team." And she'd have to do it in a public park. OU didn't have a softball stadium, so the Sooners played at Reaves Park (across the street from where Hynes Field now sits). And she'd also have to overcome a persistent feeling of disrespect. Ahead of Gasso's first game in the spring of 1995, Texas A&M coach Bob Brock shook her hand at home plate and called her the wrong name. "Good luck, Paula," he said.

"That kind of began the fire that started who I am today," Patty says.

Fueled by that flame, she knew she needed to go after the best of the best if she ever wanted to win. She knew they would likely go to UCLA or Arizona, but she wanted to make it hard for them to say no to her. "I just kept going after the top athletes in the country, always believing I might get one of them. All I needed to do was get one," she says.

That "one" was Lana Moran, a left-handed pitcher from Southern California who "changed our world," Gasso says. Moran joined Oklahoma in 1997 and became a third-team All-American as a sophomore. As a senior captain in 2000, she compiled a 26-2 record with five shutouts and a 1.26 ERA for a Sooners squad that boasted the best record in the country (66-8) — and took down mighty UCLA for its first national championship.

Gasso's connections in the SoCal region, coupled with Moran's great experience at OU — and, of course, the national title — led to more top prospects giving Oklahoma a shot. "The word spreads as they all know each other, and that's really how the ball started to get rolling," Gasso says.

Meanwhile, she was shy about her faith. Her husband, Jim — a football player she met while playing softball at Long Beach State, and married in 1986 — helped introduce her to Jesus, and was unashamed in sharing his love for God. Patty dedicated her life to Christ in 1992, and as she became more spiritually mature, she knew she didn't want to hide her faith. But she was unsure how to incorporate it into softball, thinking she could get in trouble with the school's administration. Eventually, she hosted Bible studies open to the team at her house, though a pastor's wife would lead the discussions. Attendance would fluctuate from two to three to maybe five or six players.

But then in the mid-2000s, a couple players went to the OU administration and claimed that Gasso was "taking sides" with those who were coming into her house. "That hurt my heart more than anything that I could ever imagine," she says. "I was really, really upset."

And ready to walk away from the school. After those allegations, she cut everything faith-related. She thought that if she couldn't even give players an option of having Bible studies, she couldn't stay at OU.

Then she realized that anytime believers share their faith, Satan will bring opposition. Angry, sad and hurt, Gasso again found that fire and declared, "You're not going to stop me." So she reached out to the FCA, which connected her with Roberts, who at the time was FCA's director of women's ministry in Oklahoma. "We hit it off right away and I kind of shared my dream to her, and ambition of how I wanted to go forward with this," Gasso says. Instead of trying to be a coach and a chaplain, Gasso focused on coaching while Roberts took over facilitating team chapels and Bible studies in 2005.

"It was all orchestrated by God, her finding me, me finding her and getting this thing back on the right track," Gasso says. "... The Lord kind of woke me up and was like, 'You're doing this wrong. You're not here to win games. You're here to open the door, here to win souls. You open the door, let them in. I'll take over from there.'"

Part of Gasso's challenge became being an example for her girls. If Roberts was encouraging the players to grow and share their faith, Coach needed to lead the way. So after the 2012 Women's College World Series best-of-three final, in which Oklahoma lost to Alabama, Roberts encouraged Gasso to give God glory even in defeat.

"I'm like, 'Oh, I can't do this,'" Gasso recalls. "And I just remember I blurted out, 'Whether we win or lose, we'll always give the glory to God. The glory goes to God.' And I'm thinking, 'Oh, they're going to write.' And [the media was] like, 'Are you done? Can we move on now?' But once I said it one time, it just completely changed my whole life. You just have to say it one time."

National championship No. 2 came the next season. And Gasso, with Roberts still by her side (even though she now lives in Georgia and does most of her work with OU virtually), has since grown even more bold in sharing about Christ. Faith often comes up in recruiting discussions, and some players and/or their parents really want to come to OU for that faith factor. But faith in Christ is certainly not a requirement to be in the program. Actually, the more non-believers who come in, the more opportunity to grow hearts for Christ.

Gasso is just the enabler, equipping the athletes to use their platforms, which grow larger with each national championship.

"Those championships are orchestrated by Him as well, because I've got some very brave athletes who stand on the biggest platform and are not afraid to share their faith," Gasso says. "And the Lord is like, 'Right on! Let's win you another one so you'll do it again!'"

Pressure Is A Privilege

The No. 1 pick from the 2022 MLB Draft, JACKSON HOLLIDAY will feel the spotlight that comes with being No. 1 overall, as well as the expectations that come with being the son of an MLB All-Star. But his family believes he's ready to live out the story God is writing just for him.

BY COLE CLAYBOURN

Photos by Leah Montgomery

> We like to say that pressure is a privilege. If you have pressure on you, you're probably doing something right. It's just about being able to rely on God, and being able to pray, and being able to put it all in His hands.
>
> *Jackson Holliday*

More is caught than taught, Leslee Holliday believes. And she says that's the case with her oldest son, Jackson, the No. 1 overall draft pick from the 2022 MLB Draft. He's one of the faces of the future for the rebuilding Baltimore Orioles, as well as one of the top prospects in all of baseball. That's a lot of weight on the shoulders of a 19-year-old, especially considering the name on the back of his jersey.

His father, Matt Holliday, played 15 years in the major leagues, was an All-Star in seven of them, and won a World Series with the St. Louis Cardinals in 2011. To many, he was one of the best hitters in the game during his career, as evidenced by his four Silver Slugger Awards. Orioles fans undoubtedly hope Jackson's career breeds similar results to that of his father, who also helped lead the Colorado Rockies to the World Series in 2007 and the Cardinals back to the World Series in 2013.

"There's a lot that comes with being the first pick," Leslee told Sports Spectrum. "There's a lot that comes with his dad playing in the big leagues, but I think he hasn't made it too big of a deal. I think he knows that his story is his story, and that God's prepared him for his story. He's just kind of taking it as it comes, and I really admire that."

Matt agrees that Jackson is as prepared to deal with the pressure as anyone. Yet, it's not because of anything he or Leslee necessarily taught him. It's more so from what Jackson "caught" growing up as the son of a big-leaguer.

Few people have been around Major League Baseball as much as Jackson. He was born in December 2003, just four months before Matt made his major-league debut with the Rockies. And as Leslee put it, the three of them "just kind of grew up together." Much of that time was spent at the ballpark. While most kids were in the crowd asking for souvenirs and autographs, Jackson was on the field watching batting practice and playing catch with major leaguers.

In high school, after Dad had retired, the family settled in Matt's hometown of Stillwater, Oklahoma, where he became a volunteer coach for Oklahoma State University's baseball team. Jackson would take grounders with the collegians and also have chances to talk shop with guys like Gold Glove-winning third baseman Nolan Arenado, whom Matt played with in Colorado.

"That's been sort of his whole life. He's seen what the professional lifestyle looks like," Matt told Sports Spectrum. "He's seen all the challenges that being a professional baseball player offers: what it looks like to live out your faith, what it looks like to be a good teammate, what it looks like to work hard, what it takes to make it to the major leagues, and what it takes to stay in the major leagues. He's seen plenty of guys who haven't."

Jackson — a five-tool shortstop who hits left-handed — knows the stakes are higher now that he's playing professionally, but pressure and criticism have never really bothered him much. He learned by watching his father's career that those two things are inescapable aspects of playing pro ball. They're just part of the job, and he's seen what can happen to players who let it overcome them. He says it's easy for him to just put all that weight on God.

"We like to say that pressure is a privilege," Jackson told Sports Spectrum. "If you have pressure on you, you're probably doing something right. It's just about being able to rely on God, and being able to pray, and being able to put

AP Photo/Julio Cortez

it all in His hands, to just take it day by day and play the game that I've grown up loving."

Jackson carries himself with a relaxed demeanor and doesn't let much change his disposition, even being the first overall pick. He's never really been one to chase the spotlight or brag about himself, no matter how huge the hype gets around him. Viewers watching his interview on MLB Network shortly after getting picked by the Orioles may have thought he was too subdued. But that's how he's always been — never too high, never too low.

"I think Jackson, ever since he was a little boy, has always been very reasonable and very steady," Leslee said. "Even as a little kid, there weren't a lot of fits. He's always had a very steady and reasonable approach to life."

His journey reminds her a lot of Matt's, one marked by steady growth — physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. From a young age, Jackson watched his parents live a life that put Jesus at the center. He watched as they used their platforms to share their faith and their money to give back to their community. He watched his dad show how to be competitive and tough while still exhibiting the love of Christ to others.

As he's grown up, Jackson has surrounded himself with other like-minded, and wiser, people who encourage him in his walk with God. He's made his faith his own, too.

Life has always been about more than just baseball for the Hollidays, and Jackson gets that part of it. After so much time watching, it's now his time to go and live it all out on his own.

Jackson signed his contract with the Orioles in late July, just a few weeks after being drafted, and reported to his first minor league assignment on Aug. 10 — the rookie-level squad in the Florida Complex League. After just eight games, he was moved up to Single-A with the Delmarva Shorebirds in Salisbury, Maryland, where he played 12 games. In those 20 contests at both stops, he batted .297 with one home run, nine runs batted in and four stolen bases. Though he's likely to start the 2023 campaign back with Delmarva, he was invited to attend spring training with the big-league squad.

When Jackson left home, it was a big adjustment for the Holliday household. Speaking on their podcast, "Table Forty," Matt and Leslee shared how much the dynamic of their family would change without Jackson around. It was different for Matt and Leslee, but also for their other three children — Ethan, Gracyn and Reed, all of whom look up to Jackson.

Ethan, a high school sophomore who is quite the baseball player in his own right, said it's his goal to be the No. 1 pick, just like his brother. They push and encourage each other in their walks with God, and Leslee said Jackson has set an example for both of his little brothers on how to compete and focus on a goal. Jackson recently got engaged to his longtime girlfriend, Chloe, and Leslee said he's set a good example to both Ethan and Gracyn, their only daughter, of how a man should treat a woman in a Christ-honoring relationship.

The Hollidays (L-R): Ethan, Jackson, Reed, Gracyn, Leslee, Matt

Photo courtesy of Leslee Holliday, Sports Spectrum Photo/Leah Montgomery

"He's a really good leader. Everything he does is honoring the Lord," Ethan told Sports Spectrum. "He's also honoring his friends, his family, his teammates. He's a really, really good human. He's a really good brother."

The Hollidays rarely do anything apart, but are adjusting to the new normal with Jackson in Salisbury, which sits near the Maryland-Delaware border almost 1,400 miles away from his family in Stillwater. FaceTime and text messages help them stay connected, and the family will travel to see him play when they can. But for the most part, it's Jackson's time to spread his own wings.

"As a parent, you feel like you have these years to prepare them for whatever that looks like, whether it's college, or in this case professional baseball," Matt said. "You spend 18 years trying to prepare them as best you can in every facet of their life, whether it's the occupation they choose, the faith they want to live out, the friendships, the ways to be a mature man of God. You trust that the 18 years has prepared them.

"There's no magic pill. You're here for them and you're around them as much as you can, but ultimately this is his career."

Had Jackson not been drafted, he was committed to play at Oklahoma State, a program that has pretty much been the Holliday family business through the years. Jackson's uncle, Josh, has been the head coach of the Cowboys since 2012. Prior to that, Tom Holliday, Jackson's grandfather, served as the head coach from 1997-2003. Matt was slated to play football for the Cowboys before deciding to pursue baseball instead.

Jackson playing at OSU would have obviously allowed the family to stay together for at least a few more years. But as a senior at Stillwater High School last year, Jackson hit .685 and broke the national high school record with 89 hits in a season (previously held by J.T. Realmuto, now the Philadelphia Phillies catcher). He was named High School Player of the Year by Baseball America and Perfect Game. That type of play pushed his name up many MLB draft boards, and in July he became the first high schooler to go No. 1 since 2017. And he's the second son of a major leaguer to be taken first overall in the MLB draft; the other is Hall of Famer Ken Griffey Jr.

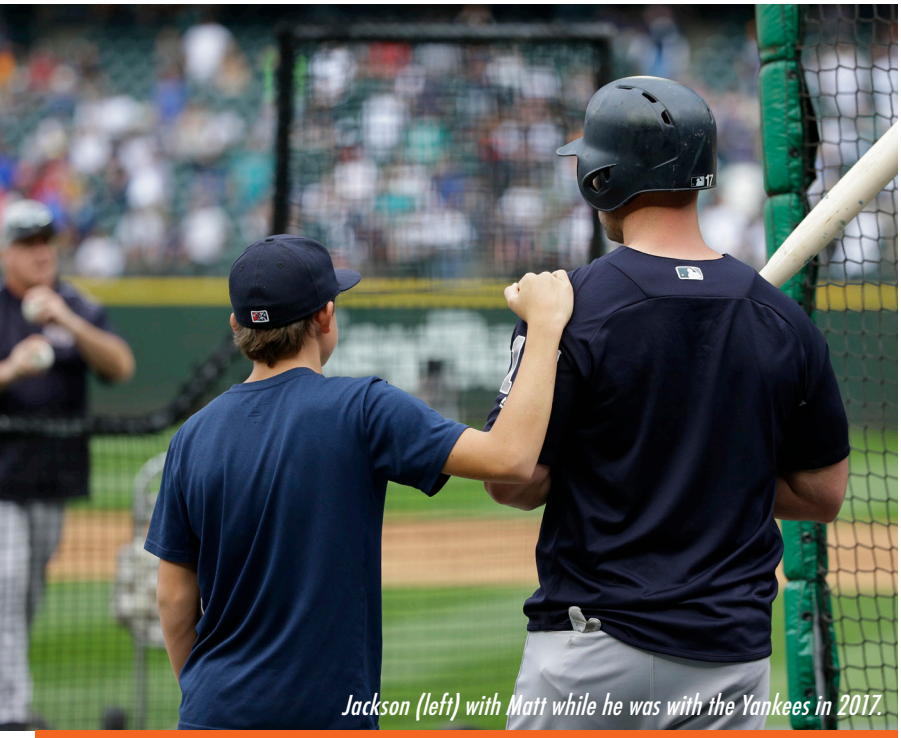
> **"There's a lot that comes with being the first pick. There's a lot that comes with his dad playing in the big leagues, but I think he hasn't made it too big of a deal. I think he knows that his story is his story, and that God's prepared him for his story.**
>
> *Leslee Holliday*

When it became clear Jackson wouldn't be attending OSU or be around to attend the family Bible study, Leslee said she started praying for Jackson's next step, and that he'd end up in an organization where he could meet friends and teammates who could encourage him in his faith.

"I think the cool thing about the Lord is He hears our prayers," she said. "God has honored that prayer and answered that prayer in many ways."

Leaving the comfort of home and community for the unknown of a pro baseball clubhouse is quite the change. There are a multitude of cultures and personalities mixed together, creating an environment that even the most grounded of athletes have let change them, and not always for the better. Furthermore, the minor league plight is far from glamorous, and can be difficult for some people. Living situations aren't always the best, as oftentimes players pack houses and apartments with anywhere between five and 10 players to save costs. Pre-game meals pale

> **"I love meeting new people and learning about my teammates and becoming friends with them, so I love that part about the minor leagues so far. And hopefully I'm able to share my faith and grow the Kingdom.**
>
> *Jackson Holliday*



Jackson (left) with Matt while he was with the Yankees in 2017.

> He's seen all the challenges that being a professional baseball player offers: what it looks like to live out your faith, what it looks like to be a good teammate, what it looks like to work hard, what it takes to make it to the major leagues, and what it takes to stay in the major leagues.
>
> *Matt Holliday*

in comparison to their big-league counterparts, and players must endure long bus rides to play games in front of small crowds.

The minors comprise of young men who, despite being professional athletes, are prone to engaging in typical young men behavior, no matter how self-destructive or counterproductive it might be to their careers. The temptation is there to fit in, even for athletes who know better. Jackson has never really been prone to peer pressure, though, so it's not something Matt is particularly worried about.

"I know what he wants," Matt said. "He has things he's passionate about, and there's not many of them. He loves baseball, he loves Jesus, he loves his fiancée and he loves his family. Those are the things that are very important to him, and he's very good at compartmentalizing and really choosing those things as his priority. He's very strong in his convictions. It gives me a really strong confidence that he can handle himself and be the kind of man that I think he wants to be."

While she too is confident Jackson is able to manage himself, Leslee said it's an added bonus he has good people around him. She raved about the Orioles organization and their scouting, not just of good baseball players, but of good men. She and Matt feel like their son is in good hands.

"Some of our best memories were made in the minor leagues and some of our greatest friends were people we met in the minor leagues," she said. "So far, it looks like that's the way Jackson's story is going to go, too."

That has Jackson excited to start his minor league journey in earnest. There are plenty of guys in the organization who have a relationship with Christ, and he said he looks forward to deepening those friendships. For those on his team who may not know Christ, he hopes he can be an example and model what a Christ-centered life looks like, much like his parents did for him.

"Honestly, right now I'm just looking forward to playing," he said ahead of spring training. "We've been playing a lot of pickle ball to fuel our competitiveness. So I'm looking forward to getting to meet new people. I love meeting new people and learning about my teammates and becoming friends with them, so I love that part about the minor leagues so far.

"And hopefully I'm able to share my faith and grow the Kingdom." S

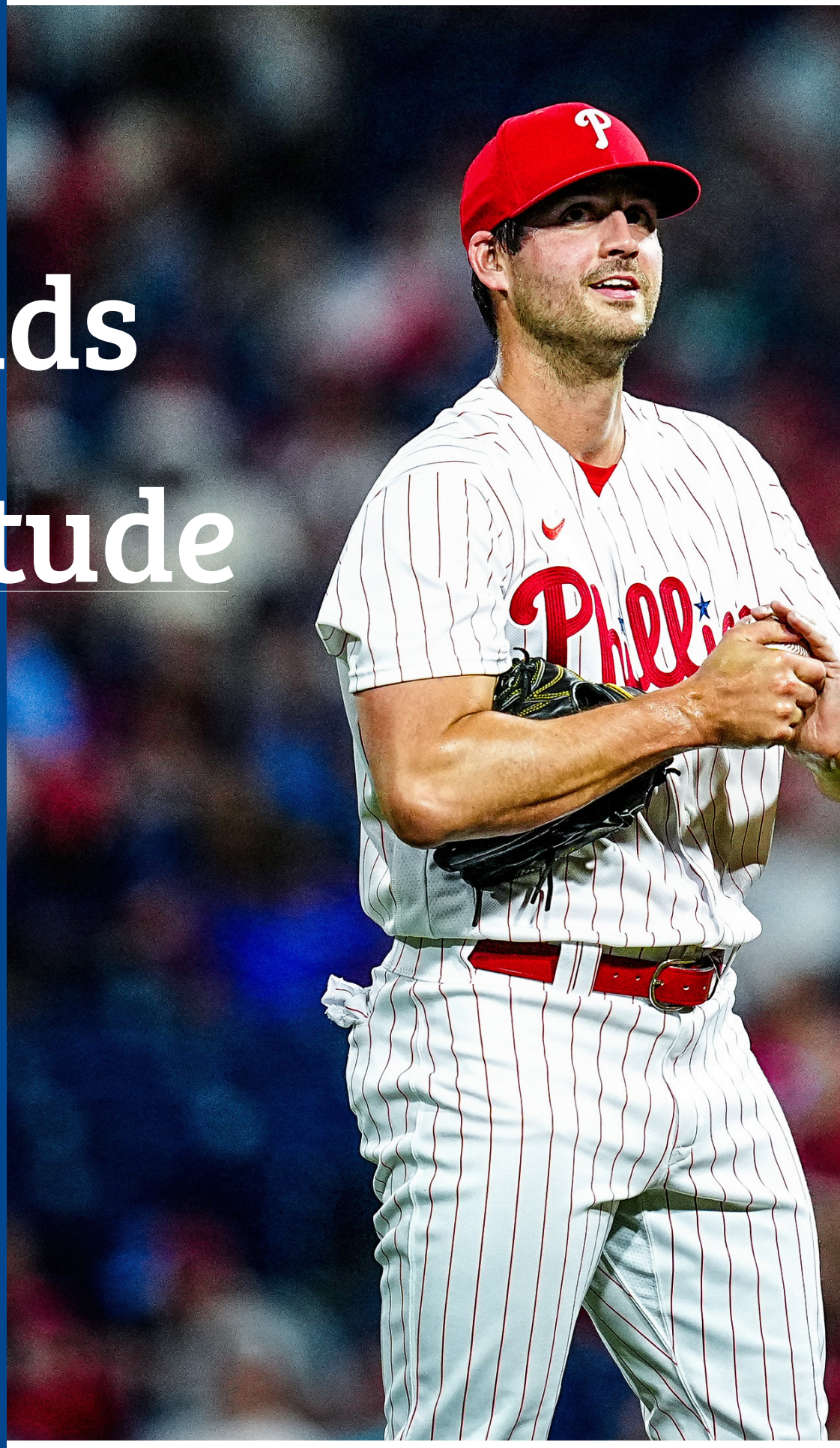
AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, Julio Cortez, Sports Spectrum Photo/Leah Montgomery

To listen to the entire interview with Jackson Holliday, visit SportsSpectrum.com

Mounds Of Gratitude

The No. 1 pick from the 2013 MLB Draft, MARK APPEL battled through injuries and struggles — and even left the game for nearly four years — before finally reaching the majors in 2022. Whatever happens in his career from here is just more favor from God.

BY SARAH RODRIGUEZ



> God is so good and He's writing way better stories than we could write for ourselves. He's just really faithful. I think it's easy to say that when you get to experience a high, but I see God's faithfulness through a lot of the lows too.
>
> *Mark Appel*

Photo courtesy of Mark Appel

As Philadelphia Phillies right-hander Mark Appel rubbed the ball in between his hands, standing at the back of the mound before the top of the ninth inning, a slight grin crept onto his face as he gazed up at the Citizens Bank Park crowd in Philadelphia the night of June 29, 2022.

"Ten seconds, five seconds, whatever it is, just spin around, take in the environment," a friend had told him. "You're never gonna get that moment again."

At 30 years and 349 days old, the day Mark had dreamed of since a child had finally arrived. He was making his Major League Baseball debut.

"I was just able to kind of breathe a little bit and be like, 'God, I literally never thought this day would come, for a while, for years,'" Mark said.

Drafted with the very first pick in the 2013 MLB Draft by his hometown Houston Astros, Mark's journey to the big leagues was filled with highs and lows, injuries and surgeries, and countless minor league appearances. But it was just part of the path to those few minutes on the mound on June 29. With that appearance, he became the oldest No. 1 overall pick to make his MLB debut.

"It was just a really overwhelming, emotional night," he said.

Though the pressure from critics to live up to expectations had grown over the years, it wasn't relief Mark felt after finally making it. It was joy — knowing that through his faith in Jesus Christ, his sure foundation, Mark didn't need to make a MLB appearance to be content.

"I was at this point in the season where I was like, 'I don't need my debut for me to feel joy; I get to play baseball,'" he told Sports Spectrum this offseason. "I haven't felt like that in a long time because I've had all these injuries and dealt with some of the pressures of life and pressures of performance. … I think it was God's kindness to me. It was His favor. He's like, 'I know you don't need this, but I'm giving it to you anyway.'"

When the 2022 season began its long grind, Mark was pitching for the Phillies' Triple-A team, the Lehigh Valley (Penn.) IronPigs, and just joyful to be playing in his second season after being out of the game for nearly four years. He had begun implementing a few tweaks to his pitching technique after talking with developmental coaches, and had begun to see his hard work paying off. Now a full-time relief pitcher after coming into pro ball as a starter, Mark began stringing together successful outings. By the end of June, he had put up a 5-0 record and 1.61 ERA out of the bullpen, to go along with five saves.

"Before you know it, you're like, 'Wait a minute, from January of 2022 until June of 2022, things are like vastly different. I feel like there might be an opportunity to play in the big leagues,'" Mark said.

The statistical outcome of 2022 didn't matter to him. Mark was focused on his definition of success: "If you can have fun and be with your teammates and try to love the people that you're around, and try to make an impact while you're there, then it's still going to be a successful year."

"I just never thought that it would be successful on the field in the same way that it felt like it was successful off the field," Mark said.

> **"Christ is all we need. Christ is sufficient for whatever circumstance you find yourself in, whether you are winning a World Series or you're in Lancaster throwing baseballs through a wall because your ERA is over 10.**
>
> ***Mark Appel***

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> I hope that when Mark pitches, he feels God's pleasure, that he knows whatever the outcome of the pitch is, he's doing one of the things that God put him on earth to do.
>
> ***John Appel***

The Appels (L-R): Mark's brother John, sister-in-law Shelley, Mark, dad Patrick, mom Sondra.

Sports Spectrum/Leah Montgomery; Photo courtesy of Mark Appel

After a tough loss on June 24, Mark and the IronPigs gathered in the clubhouse for a debrief with manager Anthony Contreras.

"And he looks at me, and I had chills," Mark said. "He's like, 'Mark, you're going to the big leagues.' And I'm like, 'Wait, so you're saying after the highest expectations in 2013 when I got drafted, basically to being out of baseball in 2017, and then coming back' — and then all of that culminated to that moment. I was overwhelmed, like almost immediately started crying."

Mark was called up to a 37-34 Phillies squad that was in the midst of a four-game series in San Diego. He joined his new teammates at Petco Park, but didn't make it into any of the games against the Padres before the Phillies headed back home to host Atlanta.

He also stayed in the bullpen June 28, and for eight more innings the next night. But as the Phillies trailed 4-1 heading into the ninth, Mark got the call. He took in the moment, then went to work. Four batters, 10 pitches, three outs and one strikeout later, No. 22 had just completed his major-league debut, pitching a scoreless inning — a lifetime in the making. And there in the stands in Philadelphia on June 29 was his older brother, John, and John's wife, Shelley, so eager to see No. 22 make it into the game.

"I remember thinking, 'Whatever happens is how it was supposed to happen,'" John said, "and we sat there and watched Mark become a big-leaguer officially."

Just two and a half years apart, Mark and John were typical brothers growing up, playing sports together and roughhousing. But family always came before sports. As the years have passed, their relationship has continued to grow, making John's presence in Philadelphia on that historic day even more special.

"We've also been there through the thick and the thin for each other, through the highs and lows in each others' lives," Mark said. "And the fact that he was there, honestly, was maybe one of my favorite things about the entire experience."

Mark was inserted into the next night's game as well, followed by two more appearances before being sent back to Lehigh Valley. He was called back up in late July for a couple more appearances, and ended the season with 10.1 MLB innings pitched. Elbow inflammation unfortunately ended his season early, and he watched from afar as the Phillies made an improbable run as a wild-card team to the World Series, where they fell in six games to … the Astros.

Mark's major-league debut was all the more remarkable considering he was injured most of the 2017 season, and in February 2018 he officially walked away from baseball, unsure if he would ever get the chance to throw a pitch at the highest level.

At the time, Mark told MLB.com, "I know that I need to take some time to just reevaluate some things and get healthy physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually — just all around want to have good practices in my life. I think there are times where playing baseball when you're hurt, when you're on the [disabled list], even when you're playing and you're in the minors and you're there for a while, it can feel pretty isolating. You're away from all the people that you love the most, and I think I just realized I wasn't excited about going back to play."

Mark had spent three years with the Astros organization before a December 2015 trade sent him to the Phillies farm system, where he jumped on and off the DL for two years before needing to reevaluate.

"It was just exhausting, so I knew I needed a break, and I'm really glad that I made that decision," Mark told Sports Spectrum late in 2021. "But you know, probably 10 months after that decision, in October of 2018, I decided to have surgery on my shoulder, and from that point, I said I want to play again. I want to have another opportunity to go out and perform and to do it with good health."

Following rehab in 2019, Mark prepared for a return in the 2020 season, but the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the minor league season. So his return came in 2021, as he made 23 appearances for the Phillies' Double- and Triple-A affiliates. But his stats looked similar to the numbers from before he walked away.

"I had a blast that I was back playing baseball," Mark said. "I was in the clubhouse, I was traveling, I was doing all the little things that you take for granted. The thing was I just didn't play well. … I had fun. I was healthy, so I accomplished my goals, but I wasn't playing well."

He thus wrestled with the decision to continue playing in 2022. Ultimately, he decided he wanted to give it at least one more year of being healthy.

"I think once I made that decision, I was like, 'All right, this is gonna be my last year playing. So let's try to make it fun and have a good time and work hard and see what can happen,'" he said.

He headed into 2022's spring training still unsure if it would be the season he finally broke into the majors. A timely conversation with John around that time helped him stay focused on one day at a time. The brothers discussed how God in the Old Testament provided manna from Heaven for the Israelites wandering in the desert. However, the people were instructed to only gather enough food for a single day, or double their portion if the Sabbath was the following day.

"God could have provided bread that lasted 40 years and given them a massive storehouse and been like, 'Here you go, you're good for the next 40 years. You won't have to worry,'" Mark said. "But that's not how God works. He wants us to trust Him every day. He wants us to basically empty the tank every day and then trust that He will [provide] when we rise tomorrow in a way that only He can do. He's gonna give us the strength to be able to get through that day, and then do it again the next day and the next day and next day."

Mark grew up in a Christian home, knowing Jesus and having a relationship with Him since he was young. Yet it was during middle school, high school and into college at Stanford when he started making his faith his own. During these pivotal years, God began to reveal to Mark the depth of the Gospel and His love for humanity.

"Instead of it still kind of being about me, it starts to just really be only about God and His glory, and I think those are the times where my faith really started to grow," Mark said.

He recounted a sanctifying moment in his life when he was pitching for the High-A Lancaster JetHawks in 2014. Struggling, with his ERA skyrocketing, he was taken out of a game in the second inning. He headed straight to the locker room, needing to release tension that had been building up for months. He then picked up a baseball off the ground and threw it at a wood panel between two lockers. It felt good. So he grabbed a box full of dozens of baseballs, and for 15 minutes chucked them through the wall.

"When it's all said and done, there are no more baseballs to throw," Mark recalled. "I have tears running down my face. It's just a mess, but I sit down and I just sense this calmness, this peace both in the room and in my heart, and I'm reminded of Paul's words in Philippians 4."

He thought of Philippians 4:12, where Paul says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

Recalling that moment, Mark said, "I'm in a circumstance that I don't necessarily want to be in, struggling in High-A, less than a year after I'm the first overall pick. But there is contentment to be had in Christ, and Christ is the One who will give me the strength to be content in the circumstance."

He realized he was so focused on getting to the next level that he was missing what God had for him in his current season.

"It was just a humble reminder [that] Christ is enough. Christ is all we need. Christ is sufficient for whatever circumstance you find yourself in, whether you are winning a World Series or you're in Lancaster throwing baseballs through

AP Photos/Matt Slocum, Sports Spectrum Photo/Leah Montgomery

a wall because your ERA is over 10," he said.

Finding contentment in Christ has filled Mark with gratitude — for baseball-related things, sure, but more so for the people God has placed in his life. So this winter — prior to re-signing with the Phillies on a minor-league contract, and subsequently being assigned to Triple-A but getting invited to spring training with the big-league club — he took off on a solo tour of the U.S. in a renovated van. He'd dreamt and prepped for months, longing to take time to see the beauty of God's creation out West and be intentional with the relationships in his life.

"Literally any region of the country, it's like I've met someone that God has intentionally placed in my life at that time to encourage me or to support me or to pray for me or whatever it is," Mark said. "And I just feel so thankful. Being able to just go and visit these people, and just let them know, 'Hey, God used you in my life in a really cool way.' I think that would be so much fun to be able to do."

From Moab, Utah, to Denver, Colorado, to Yosemite National Park in California, God continued to teach Mark a theme that has reoccurred many times in his life: God is in control.

"He is totally in control. You experience that when you're sitting under this canvas of stars in the middle of Arches National Park (in Utah) and you look up," Mark said. "... How great, awe-inspiring God is, and then humbling because we know from Scripture, and in the life of Jesus, He wants to have a relationship with us. And somehow as minuscule as we feel when we look at the sky, He also gives us an incredible amount of self-worth."

As Mark traveled, he continued to work out, stay in shape and keep pitching in preparation for the 2023 season. And as the days until Opening Day dwindled, no one knew what lay ahead for Mark. Will he have a chance to build upon his 1.74 ERA in the majors? Or were those 10.1 innings over six MLB appearances the peak of his baseball career?

Whatever the outcome this season, he has surrendered it to God.

"I hope that when Mark pitches, he feels God's pleasure, that he knows whatever the outcome of the pitch is, he's doing one of the things that God put him on earth to do," John said.

Their father, Patrick, echoed this hope for Mark's upcoming season and all God has in store for him.

"My desire for him is that he would continue to focus on relationships and others and just simply the joy of being on the baseball field," Patrick said. "And you know, if baseball, just playing the game is enough, then I will be happiest for Mark."

So Mark prepares to step on the mound again for what could be a full season at the big-league level, or perhaps his final season of pro ball. Either way, he remains focused on his solid foundation.

"God is so good and He's writing way better stories than we could write for ourselves," Mark said. "He's just really faithful. I think it's easy to say that when you get to experience a high, but I see God's faithfulness through a lot of the lows too."

To listen to the entire interview with Mark Appel, visit SportsSpectrum.com

In The Midst of Studs

Infielder **TOMMY EDMAN** has carved out a big role with the St. Louis Cardinals, a team that's been full of legends who have shown him how to excel in the game. More importantly, though, many teammates have shown him how to grow as a follower of Jesus.

BY JASON ROMANO

Tommy Edman is in his fifth season with the St. Louis Cardinals and is primarily used as a second baseman and shortstop, but has also logged time in the outfield. In 2021, he won a Gold Glove for his defensive effort at second base. In 2022, as the team's primary leadoff hitter, he hit .265 with a career-high 13 home runs, 57 RBIs and 32 stolen bases.

After a stellar college career at Stanford, he was selected in the sixth round of the 2016 MLB Draft by St. Louis, and made his MLB debut in 2019.

We spoke to the 27-year-old Edman in the offseason about playing with legends in St. Louis, his journey with Christ, and the impact his teammates have had on his faith.

Let's start with 2022. It didn't end the way you wanted with the Cardinals, but what a season to go through, particularly playing with two guys who are Hall of Fame-bound in Albert Pujols and Yadier Molina in their final season. What are your reflections on last year?

Yeah, I mean, the two Hall of Famers in Yadi and Albert, and then three possible Hall of Famers as well in Goldie (Paul Goldschmidt), (Nolan) Arenado and Waino (Adam Wainwright) as well. I've got to imagine we probably had the most experience of any team in baseball. Multiple guys with 20-plus years, and there's just such a wealth of knowledge in that clubhouse.

What was even more impressive was how humble they all were, how they were able to stay rooted, and for most of those guys staying rooted in their faith. That was a huge part of my faith journey. I learned so much in that clubhouse and getting to play with all of those guys was surreal as well — guys who have won multiple World Series, guys who have had all these accolades, won MVPs, so many All-Stars, Golden Gloves, Platinum Gloves. I mean, I was playing with so many legends, and I never would've thought I'd have that opportunity if you go back even about 10 years ago.

Take us inside what it was like to be on the team when Pujols hit his 700th home run in Los Angeles against the Dodgers. What was that night like for you?

Albert was one of my favorite players growing up. He had that unique batting stance, so I would be in my backyard just playing wiffle ball, trying to imitate Albert's stance. It's wild to think back on that. I never would've thought I'd be on Albert's team later on.

I had a unique vantage point for 700, because I was actually on first base when he hit it. He hit 699 earlier in the game and I was like, "Oh, that's insane. He's got a chance to do it this L.A. series." And then next at-bat, I'm on first base and he hits a deep fly ball to left. I just put my hands up in the air, like, "Let's go!" Then I'm like, "Wait a second, I've got to run too." So I wanted to make sure Albert didn't pass me and then the home run gets wiped out. That was an amazing experience.

What has it been like to be around this team from the aspect of faith?

I think it just makes it a lot easier to be a man of faith. I've been thinking about that a little bit. If I had gotten drafted to another team, where I'm the only believer in the clubhouse, it'd be much harder to live out that faith as compared to being in a clubhouse where all of the studs, all of the veterans, are living out their faith in a way that I aspire to. So I look up to those guys.

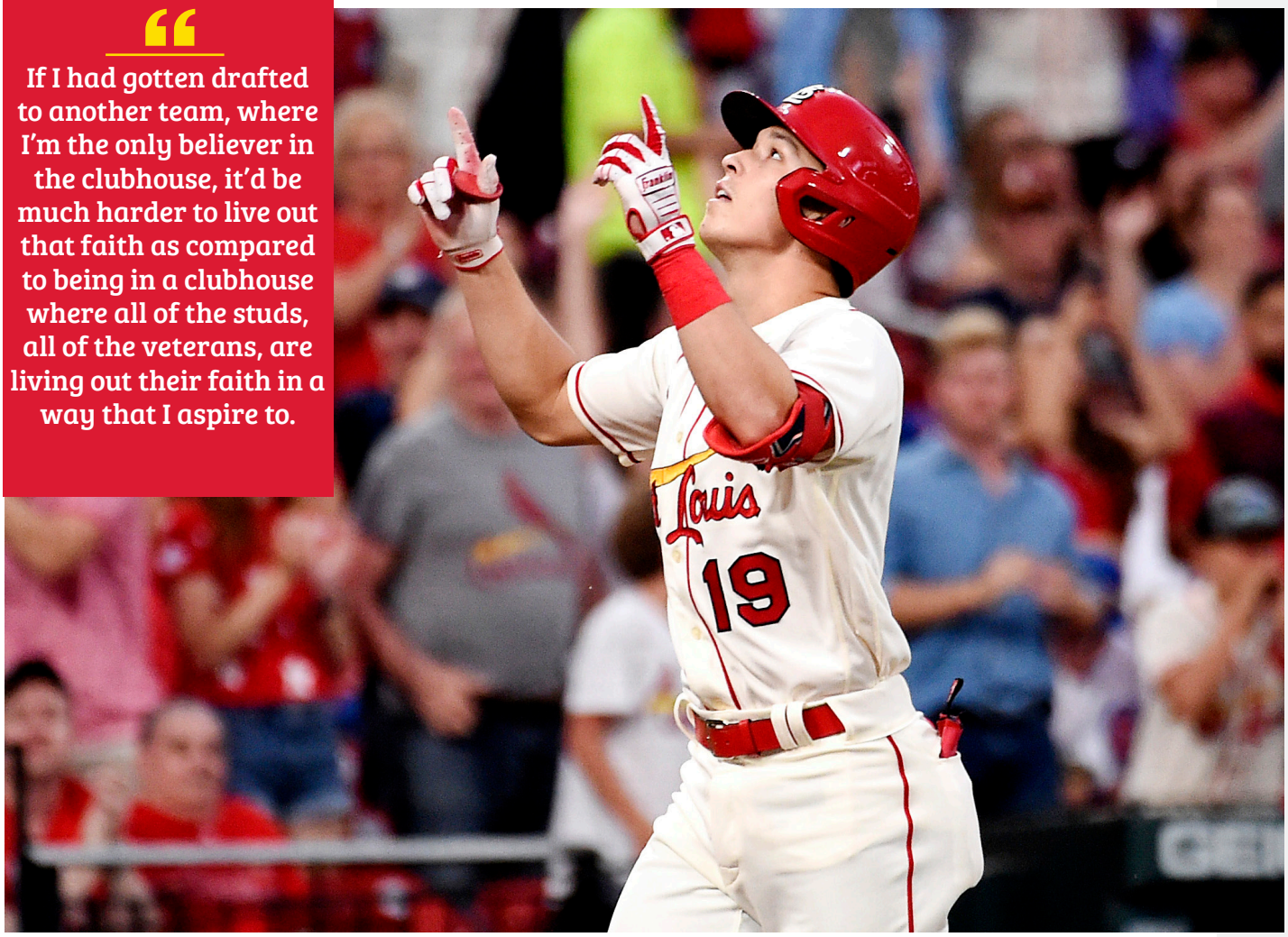
That's been a huge part of my journey, just seeing the way, the example, that they set. Not only on the field with the way they conduct themselves, with their preparation, their work ethic, the way they treat their teammates, but also off the field, how they act as a husband and as a father.

Tommy Edman with Albert Pujols in 2022.

Sports Spectrum/Leah Montgomery, AP Photo/Jeff Roberson

> "I'm not going to be defined today by how I do in baseball, but I'm going to be defined by my status as a child of God.

> If I had gotten drafted to another team, where I'm the only believer in the clubhouse, it'd be much harder to live out that faith as compared to being in a clubhouse where all of the studs, all of the veterans, are living out their faith in a way that I aspire to.



And just setting a great example for guys like myself who have looked up to them my whole life, and now getting a chance to be up close next to them.

Tell us about your journey in your faith.

So I grew up in the Church. My family, we went to church every Sunday. I'd go to Sunday School, we would pray before meals, pray before going to bed, pray when we wake up in the morning. So I had a great foundation as I headed into high school.

When I got to college at Stanford, I was on my own for the first time, so there's no going to church with my parents, going to church with my family, and no praying together as a family. So at that point it was kind of up to me to continue on in that faith. And it probably took me a couple of years to figure out what that looked like for me. I had a couple of great mentors, because I still went to FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes). We had a great FCA group.

But I feel like at that point I still didn't necessarily understand what it meant to consistently be in the Word and to have that relationship with Jesus, or abide in Jesus. I would say once I got drafted by the Cardinals and I went off to go play minor league baseball, I had the same sort of thing with a couple of good mentors, but I felt like I always had one foot in, one foot out. I was still doing some things that didn't necessarily represent Jesus well, but I would always come back. I would still try to find ways to tap back into my faith, and find a mentor who would help me through the Bible.

I think probably the biggest turning point was getting called up and then seeing those guys like Waino and Goldie, who have been so strong in their faith for a long time, and have been really successful in the game. I got to have a lot of good conversations with Waino about what it looked like to be a follower of Jesus, and developing that routine for myself. And then once I started developing that routine, I started to realize, "OK, I have this daily thing that I do every day, where I'm constantly going back to Jesus." That showed me what a relationship is actually going to look like. So for me, it was probably at that point that I started to realize that this is something I've got to do every day if I want to actually build my relationship and grow my faith.

What's it been like for you these last few years, just growing and abiding in Christ as a big-leaguer?

A lot of it is just figuring out what my daily routine is like. So we started the "Walking with Waino" 365-day Bible plan, which was amazing. I've followed along with that the past couple of years. Obviously I missed a few days — I mean, more than a few days — but I just have something I know I can turn back to. I can always go to this and just catch up and see what we're going with right now. So it really started with that, just reading the Bible more, which resulted in me

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praying more, because I would read the Bible and then pray afterwards. So that was the foundation of my routine.

And then with 2020 and COVID, we kind of had a weird year where it resulted in there being a lot of isolation. You weren't really able to have a community to get together with and discuss things like that. This past year was great because we had a team Bible study where one guy would lead the Bible study each month, and we would discuss it on the text thread. When we went on the road, we would try to get together once every road trip and discuss the things that we're talking about. I think that community feel was really important.

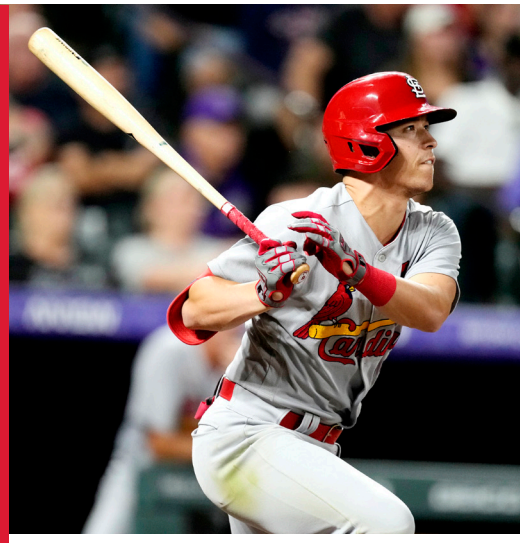
What's the biggest difference between rookie Tommy Edman in 2019 — the baseball player, the man of God — and the version I'm talking to right now?

I think this probably applies to both areas, but I think I just know myself a lot better. From the baseball standpoint, just learning my swing, learning my body, learning what it needs over the course of a long season. I mean, it's 162 games and six maybe seven months where you're coming to the field. You're getting ready to play baseball every single day and it takes a toll on your body. You've got to learn to develop your routine, figure out what works for you.

And not only the physical side, but the mental side as well. I can definitely notice as soon as I start to feel my mental side start to stray away from where I'm feeling confident. There are definitely some times where I'm feeling like, "Dang, I don't feel good at all. I don't know how I'm going to get through this day." And it's during those times where I found that it helps to rely on my faith and rely on Jesus. Where I'm like, "OK, I need to take a step back, get into the Word a little bit more, spend some quiet time with God where I'm able to reframe my mind." Where I'm saying, "OK, I'm not going to be defined today by how I do in baseball, but I'm going to be defined by my status as a child of God."

That's something that's really important for me to remember. It's really easy to forget over the course of a season, when you get wrapped up in your routine and you get wrapped up in how long the season is. So I've figured out those cues for myself, so I don't go down a darker hole than I need to because there's always going to be ups and downs.

> "It's during those times where I found that it helps to rely on my faith and rely on Jesus. Where I'm like, 'OK, I need to take a step back, get into the Word a little bit more, spend some quiet time with God where I'm able to reframe my mind.'



Tommy Edman with Adam Wainwright in 2019.

AP Photo/Joe Puetz David Zalubowski Jae C. Hong Jeff Roberson

SPORTS SPECTRUM PODCAST

To listen to the entire interview with Tommy Edman, visit SportsSpectrum.com

How God Drew It Up

With the 25th anniversary of one of the most iconic shots in college basketball history upon us, the DREW FAMILY reflects on that moment, their shared faith in Christ, and the coaching journeys of Homer, Scott and Bryce.

BY JOSHUA DOERING

Homer Drew

March 13, 1998

Bryce Drew

Scott Drew

AP Photo/File, John Gaps III

Immediately after hitting a 3-pointer at the buzzer to lift No. 13-seed Valparaiso over No. 4-seed Ole Miss in the 1998 NCAA Tournament, Bryce Drew hit the deck. His dad and head coach, Homer, was asked after the game why Bryce dove onto the floor. Homer thought it might have been an attempt to protect himself as his teammates came running at him. Only when they were walking out of the locker room at Myriad Convention Center in Oklahoma City that afternoon of March 13 did Homer learn the real reason.

Bryce told Homer he dove on the floor because it was the closest place he could get to where he could give thanks to the Lord.

"Bryce realized it wasn't him, but it was God's power through him that allowed that shot to go in," Homer said on the Sports Spectrum Podcast in November. "And that was really touching."

Twenty-five years later, that shot remains one of the most iconic in college basketball history.

Trailing 69-67 with 20 seconds remaining, Valparaiso got a defensive stop and secured the rebound. The ball found its way to Bryce — the team's leading scorer (19.8 points per game) and a two-time Mid-Continent Conference Player of the Year — at midcourt. He pump faked, dumped the ball off to center Zoran Viskovic and reset himself on the 3-point line. Viskovic immediately gave the ball back to Bryce, who was wide open and took a shot with seven seconds left.

"All of us were very excited because I've seen Bryce make that shot in our backyard and in our arena at Valparaiso for years, so [I] was thrilled when he had that opportunity," Homer recalled. "One of his dreams was always to hit a game-winning shot."

But this attempt hit the front of

March 13, 1998

> Bryce realized it wasn't him, but it was God's power through him that allowed that shot to go in. And that was really touching.
>
> *Homer Drew*

the rim. The rebound was collected by Southeastern Conference Player of the Year Ansu Sesay, whom Valparaiso fouled with 4.1 seconds remaining.

He missed the first free throw. Homer took his final timeout.

Sesay's second free throw came off the back of the rim and went out of bounds. Valparaiso ball along the baseline with 2.5 seconds on the clock.

Homer then called for a play named "Pacer" in honor of the NBA team that plays 150 miles south of Valparaiso's campus. So Jamie Sykes threw a deep pass to Bill Jenkins, who caught the ball past half-court and quickly passed it to Bryce running by him on the right wing. Bryce's second attempt at a game-winner was true.

"When God blesses you and He gives you something that you don't deserve — and He gave me an awesome platform with that ball going in the rim; it very easily could've been short and not gone in — it's something that I really enjoy talking about, just because there was a lot of commitment in it, a lot of hard work, a lot of faith, a lot of belief," Bryce said on the Sports Spectrum Podcast.

And the whole Drew family was there to witness it. Dad, of course, was on the bench, as was the oldest child in the family, Scott, serving as an assistant coach. In the stands was mother Janet, sister Dana, and her husband, Casey Shaw.

Bryce finished the game with 22 points, and followed it up with another 22 in the second round, an 83-77 win over No. 12-seed Florida State. That sent Valparaiso to its first and only Sweet 16 appearance (a 74-68 loss to No. 8-seed Rhode Island).

"It's such a fond memory for myself because I grew up watching the NCAA Tournament," Bryce said. "I always wanted to be part of March Madness. To be able to be part of the history and win a game on a last-second shot in the first round, you know, it's something that I kind of reflect on all those Friday nights and Saturday nights in the gym, that it was worth it."

Homer was the head coach at Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana, for a large portion of his kids' childhoods, which meant Scott, Dana and Bryce took full advantage of the school's numerous athletic facilities.

"They thought their backyard was the basketball gymnasium at Bethel College," Homer said. "I can remember we would be playing touch football, we

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would play soccer, we would roller skate on the gym floor."

It was basketball that stuck, though, as all three Drew children grew up to pursue careers in the sport. But as Dad was laying a basketball foundation for his children, he was also helping set a foundation for faith. Homer grew up going to church and knew about Jesus, but it wasn't until he had kids that he developed a personal relationship with God.

Bryce saw that faith lived out in his parents, but faith was something he truly had to make his own during his sophomore year of high school, when he needed surgery to address a heart condition. It was a newer procedure, and he remembers having to sign papers preventing the doctors from being sued if he died.

That's when Janet gave him a verse to lean on — Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

"It kind of made me grow up early and realize, 'You know what? When I open my eyes, I have no control over what's going to happen in my life,'" Bryce said. "From that point on, even if my parents were out of town and couldn't go to church, I wanted to go and learn more about the Lord and grow in my faith.

"That was my first step, but there've been other steps along the way where I think God's really shown me His presence and just how He's in control no matter if it's a good circumstance or a bad circumstance."

A couple other surgeries followed the initial one, but Bryce eventually returned to the court and ended up being named Indiana's Mr. Basketball in 1994. He went on to play for Homer at Valparaiso, then was taken 16th overall in the 1998 NBA Draft and played six seasons in the league.

He was the second Drew child to go pro. After a remarkable career at the University of Toledo — she left in 1995 as the school's all-time leader in points and assists, which led to her being in the school's Hall of Fame — Dana played professionally in Italy for three years.

Scott, meanwhile, decided to stop playing basketball as a high school sophomore, but became a student manager for the men's basketball team while he attended Butler University. He was set to go on to law school after he graduated, but came home for Christmas his senior year and told Homer he wanted to get into coaching. Dad told him that was a great idea once he got his law degree, but Scott clarified that he meant becoming a coach right away.

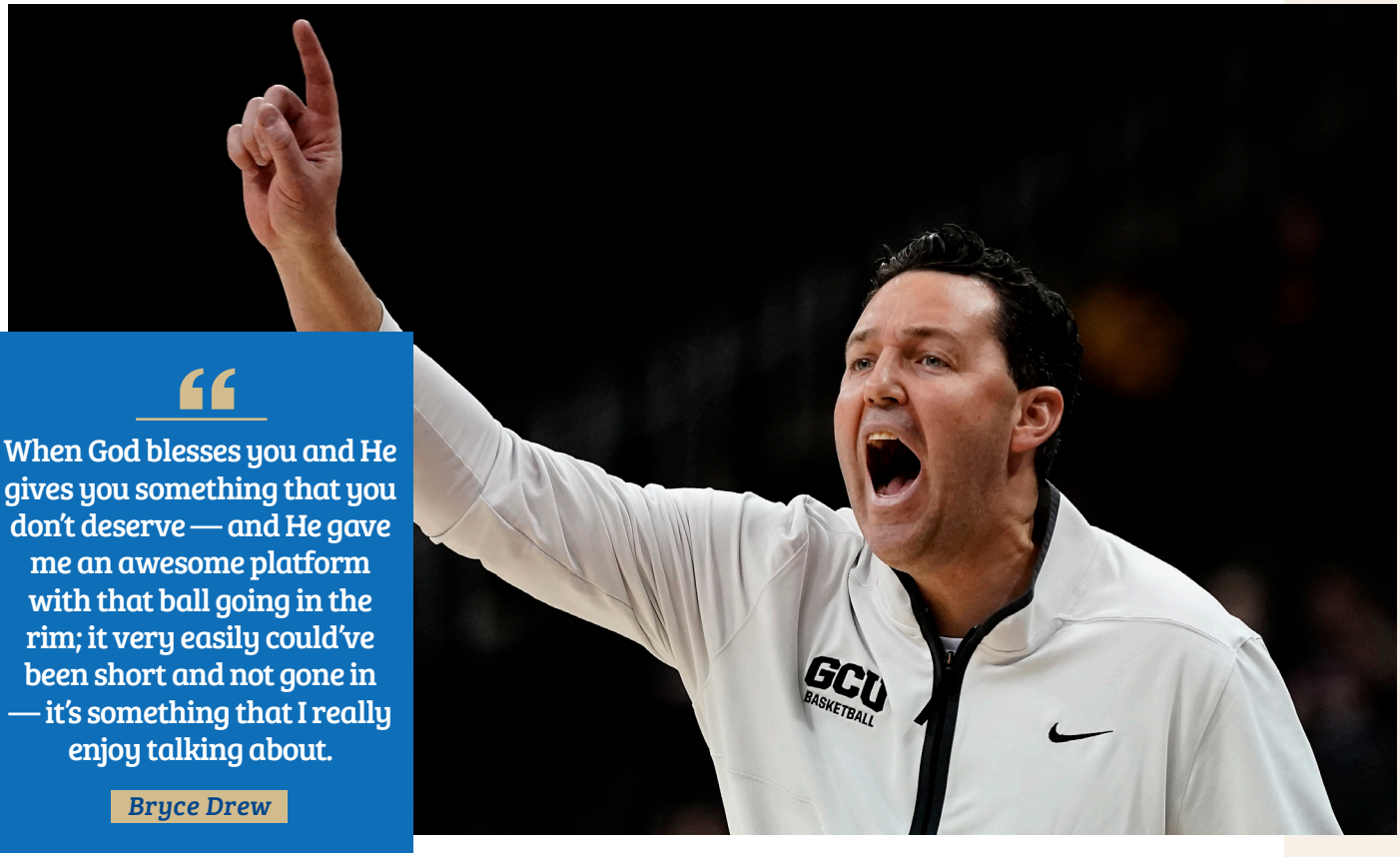
Valparaiso, which Homer took over in 1988, happened to have a graduate assistant position open, so Homer hired Scott. When Homer retired after the 2001-02 season, Scott succeeded him as head coach. But when Scott was hired by Baylor a year later, Homer came out of retirement and returned to his old job.

Scott inherited a Baylor program marred by tragedy and scandal. The Bears won a total of 12 conference games in Scott's first four seasons as the program dealt with severe sanctions — some self-imposed and some levied by the NCAA — stemming from violations under previous head coach Dave Bliss.

Slowly but surely, Scott was able to rebuild Baylor. The program won 20 games and made the NCAA Tournament in 2007-08. It had been two decades since either of those things happened. Two years later, the Bears went 28-8 and won an NCAA Tournament game for the first time since 1950. That was the first of two trips to the Elite Eight in three seasons. A run of four straight NCAA Tournament appearances began

AP Photo/J.Pat Carter, File, John Gaps III, Darron Cummings

> "I knew that we could have that success here at Baylor, and it's just great to be able to do it and allow great, young Christian men to have impacts on so many future generations just by hearing their interviews and their testimonies.
>
> *Scott Drew*



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>
> *Bryce Drew*

two years after the second Elite Eight. In 2017, the program ascended to the Associated Press' No. 1 national ranking for the first time ever.

As he became more and more successful, Scott remained dedicated to his Christ-centered vision for the program. Coaching at the largest Baptist college in the country made it even easier for Scott to emphasize and talk about faith.

"I knew that we could have that success here at Baylor, and it's just great to be able to do it and allow great, young Christian men to have impacts on so many future generations just by hearing their interviews and their testimonies," he said on the Sports Spectrum Podcast.

At the center of Scott's program is a culture of J.O.Y., which stands for "Jesus, Others, Yourself." He got the acronym from Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney, who was introduced to it by Pro Football Hall of Fame coach Tony Dungy.

"When I'm coaching, that's when I feel closest to God at times," Scott said. "Whenever you're in His will and doing what He calls you to do, there's just that joy and excitement. … I knew He wanted me in coaching and as my relationship grew, I knew He wanted me in coaching for the right reasons."

Baylor missed March Madness in 2018, but returned and fell in the second round in 2019. The Bears jumped back to the nation's No. 1 ranking in January 2020, and by Feb. 18, 2020, they were 24-1 and winners of 23 in a row. However, they dropped three of their final five games before the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With four starters returning, Baylor opened the 2020-21 season with 18 straight victories. A road loss to Kansas was the Bears' only blemish during the regular season, and they entered the NCAA Tournament as a No. 1 seed.

A No. 15 seed in that tournament was Grand Canyon (in Phoenix) — coached by Bryce. He had joined Homer's staff at Valparaiso and taken over as head coach when Homer retired for good after the 2010-11 season. The Crusaders won four regular-season conference titles and reached the NCAA Tournament twice in Bryce's five seasons.

He was hired by Vanderbilt in 2016 and led the Commodores to the Big Dance in his first season. But Vanderbilt parted ways with Bryce in 2019 after a 9-23 season. He took a year off from coaching and then returned to be the head coach at Grand Canyon in 2020. And again in his first season, he led his team to the NCAA Tournament. Though GCU fell to No. 2-seed Iowa in the first round, it was the program's first-ever March Madness appearance.

And because that tournament was held completely in Indianapolis in an effort to reduce travel and stop the spread of COVID, Homer and Janet had the opportunity to watch both their sons coach in the same NCAA Tournament — in the state where Homer spent more than three decades as a head coach (he was inducted into the College Basketball Hall of Fame in 2019).

Scott's squad made a much longer run in that 2021 NCAA Tournament. The Bears won two games in the same Hinkle Fieldhouse gym where he worked as a student manager with Butler, and those victories preceded a triumph over undefeated Gonzaga in the final, giving Baylor its first men's basketball national championship.

After the game ended, millions watched as Scott's team gathered to pray. Even in the greatest moment in program history, Baylor coaches and players kept God at the center of the celebrations. The culture of J.O.Y. was mentioned in interview after interview.

As much as he's accomplished with

AP Photo/Cliff Schiappa, File Orlin Wagner, Charlie Neibergall, File

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all of the wins and the players he's helped send to the NBA, Scott is more focused on creating an environment where everyone who comes through the program is set up for success whenever their basketball career comes to an end.

"It's a privilege and a blessing to be able to not only pour into guys character-wise, academically and athletically, but the most important thing is winning the game of life, and that's the spiritual component," he said.

Scott wrote a book — titled "The Road to J.O.Y." — about his team's experience inside the NCAA Tournament "bubble" and the foundational role faith played in rebuilding the Baylor program.

"Scott's book really captures what they did in the bubble and how they grew as a team and grew together as a coaching staff and as a basketball team," Homer said. "It was a joy to witness from outside."

The primary motivation for writing the book was simply to acknowledge what God had done at Baylor.

"The only reason I wanted to do this was just to share what God's done [in] our program," Scott said. "It's His platform, so I just wanted to bring Him all the honor and glory."

That's the way each member of the Drew family approaches their careers in basketball. Like Bryce diving on the floor 25 years ago, somehow, someway, God is going to get the glory.

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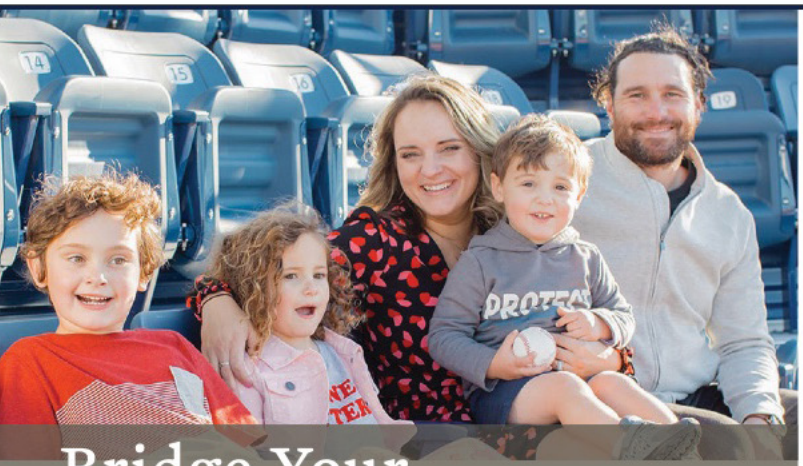

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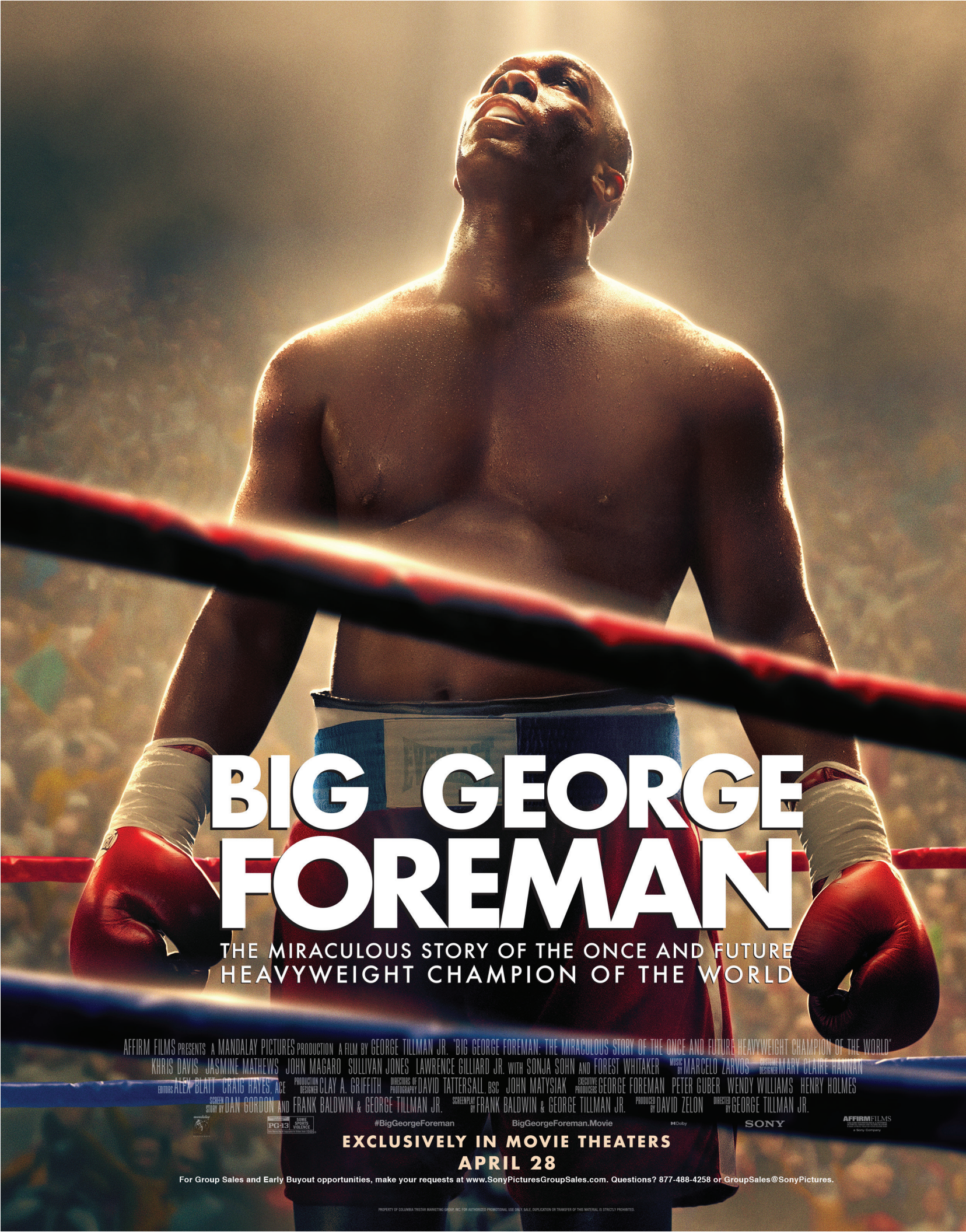
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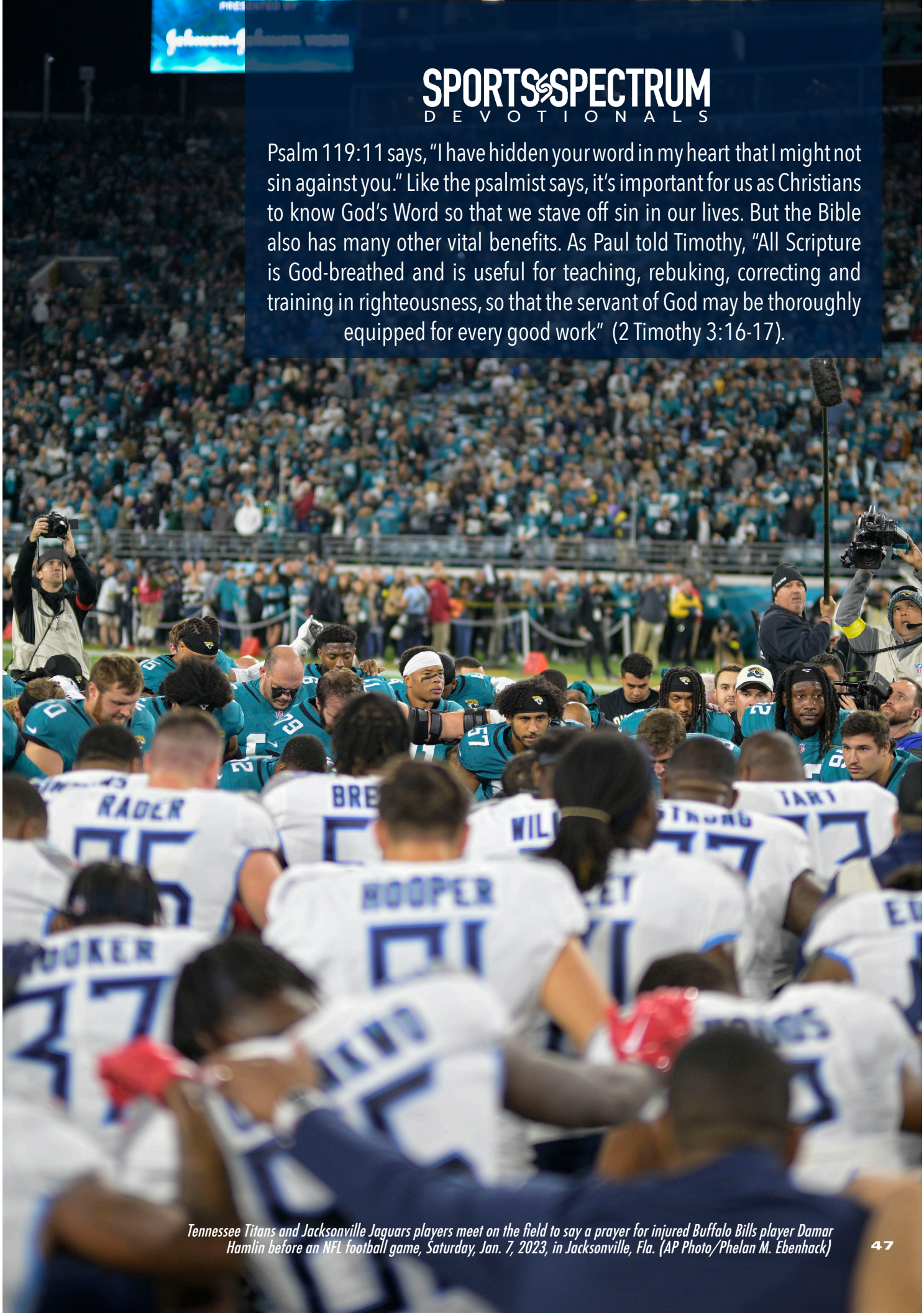
SPORTS SPECTRUM
DEVOTIONALS

Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Like the psalmist says, it's important for us as Christians to know God's Word so that we stave off sin in our lives. But the Bible also has many other vital benefits. As Paul told Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).



Tennessee Titans and Jacksonville Jaguars players meet on the field to say a prayer for injured Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin before an NFL football game, Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023, in Jacksonville, Fla. (AP Photo/Phelan M. Ebenhack)

NICK AHMED

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS **SHORTSTOP**

FIX YOUR GAZE

Last year was really tough for me. I had been dealing with a shoulder injury for a couple years and it finally got to a point where I couldn't throw the ball across the infield. Off the field, I couldn't put on my seatbelt and could barely take a shower. A lot of things became challenging.

So I was going to go see a doctor for a second opinion, and the night before, I woke up at 3 a.m. with the worst sickness I think I've ever felt in my life. COVID. For basically three weeks I could barely get out of bed and was just winded and dizzy.

After that, as I'm rehabbing the shoulder, my ankle — which had bothered me for a bit — started getting even worse. So I ended up getting that looked at as well — and it turned into another surgery. Not long later, I started having severe stomach pain and ended up in the hospital for a day. After seeing a few doctors, one finally found that I had a parasite.

Sometimes life can just come at you in waves, right? There were so many days I was just overwhelmed by the pain and sickness and didn't know if I was going to be better — a hopeless feeling. So I turned to Scripture and tried to lean into what God was saying to help me through it. And 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NLT) just kept jumping out at me:

"That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever."

That passage reshaped my perspective. I realized my gaze was fixed on my pain, on my sickness, on the situation. But then I fixed my gaze back onto Jesus, where it belonged. That's why we read the Word and continue to come to God in prayer — so we can fix our gaze on Him. It's not a one-time thing when you have your salvation moment. You have to continue to do it over and over and over again.

It's so important to continually read the Bible to understand what God says about Himself, what He says about us, and understand what He says about who we are with and without Him. Even if you have been walking with God for a long time, you can still have a tendency to drift away. So go back to Scripture to reaffirm your identity in Him.

Look for what God's telling you to do. You don't need to over-spiritualize it or make it this complicated, theological thing. Just look for something simple in His Word that's going to help you today, in the moment. Then keep your gaze on God.

AP Photo/David Zalubowski Ross D. Franklin

WRITTEN BY
REZA ZADEH
DENVER BRONCOS CHAPLAIN

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

[Open with John 8:12]

Even if you aren't too familiar with the Bible, you may have heard the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. It's in these first few lines of the Bible that we read the famous words, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

Of all the things God could have created first, do you ever wonder why it was light? Was that intentional? As we discover more and more through science of what God created, we see He was, in fact, intentional when He created light first.

A quick look at science tells us light is necessary in photosynthesis to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen for us to breathe. Light rays from the sun actually cleanse lakes from harmful bacteria, so animals and humans can have drinking water. Light is foundational for the growth of grass and vegetation, which many animals consume. When two of my three kids were born, they had a condition called jaundice, and the nurses told us it wasn't too serious because the best cure was rays from the sun.

Think about that. Light allows us to breathe and drink, gives us food to eat, and is a healing agent. Then in John's gospel account, we see him talk about Jesus being the Light of the world (John 8:12).

Light is foundational to our physical lives, and through the light of Jesus, light is foundational to our spiritual lives as well.

BEAUTIFUL FEET

[Open with Romans 10:15]

Most of us can agree that feet are gross. They are typically cooped up in sweaty socks and sneakers. Sometimes we caress our feet after a hard day, and some people even get their feet massaged and well-manicured by pedicures.

As a dad of teenagers who are very active in sports, there is almost nothing worse than when I pick up my daughter and her teammates from volleyball practice and they take off their shoes in the car. I had to drive with my window down one 20-degree night because of the stench of sweaty feet.

However, Scripture mentions the "feet of those who bring good news" in another light. As Paul is communicating with the believers in Rome, he reminds them of the calling each of us have in sharing the Good News of Jesus. As he encourages believers to verbally share the salvation story, he reminds them of Isaiah's ancient words affirming those who step out in faith and tell others about Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 10:15, "As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"

Many of us can feel awkward sharing our faith. Typically, it's not that we don't want to, we are just nervous about how we will be received. God knows this about us and wants us to know there is no greater effort than sharing our faith. God looks affectionately to those who do share their faith and declares them beautiful.

DISCIPLINE

[Open with Hebrews 12:11]

Nobody likes to be disciplined. As a kid, I dreaded my parents' discipline, but that was because I didn't understand it. Hebrews 12 gives us great insight on the difference between punishment and discipline. Verse 11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

The writer of Hebrews makes a foundational point we can all glean from. He reminds us that although painful, God allows discipline in our lives for our ultimate good. Earlier in the passage, he tells us that the Lord actually disciplines those He loves (v. 6). For many of us, that seems backwards. If God really loves us, why does He discipline us? Why would He spiritually "spank" or "punish" us? If God's character is dripping with love, why would He do this?

One important thing we must remember is there is a big difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is birthed out of fear and anger. Discipline is birthed out of relationship and love. A parent can see the harm that can come from certain behaviors of their child, so a parent lovingly disciplines that child to prevent them from doing those things again. Conversely, punishment does not have the good of the child in mind, just the emotions of the authority figure. Very often, punishment is done out of anger.

Throughout the story of God in the Bible, we clearly see that God is in the business of building up His people, not punishing them.

EQUIPPED FOR GOOD WORKS

[Open with 2 Peter 1:3]

There is no worse feeling than thinking we are disappointing God. If we're honest, I think many of us would say we are letting down God because we are not able to live the life we know He wants us to. It could be struggling with a certain habit or sin, or not engaging in conversation with someone about Jesus when we know the Lord is prompting us. Many of us just feel so unequipped for the life God wants us to live.

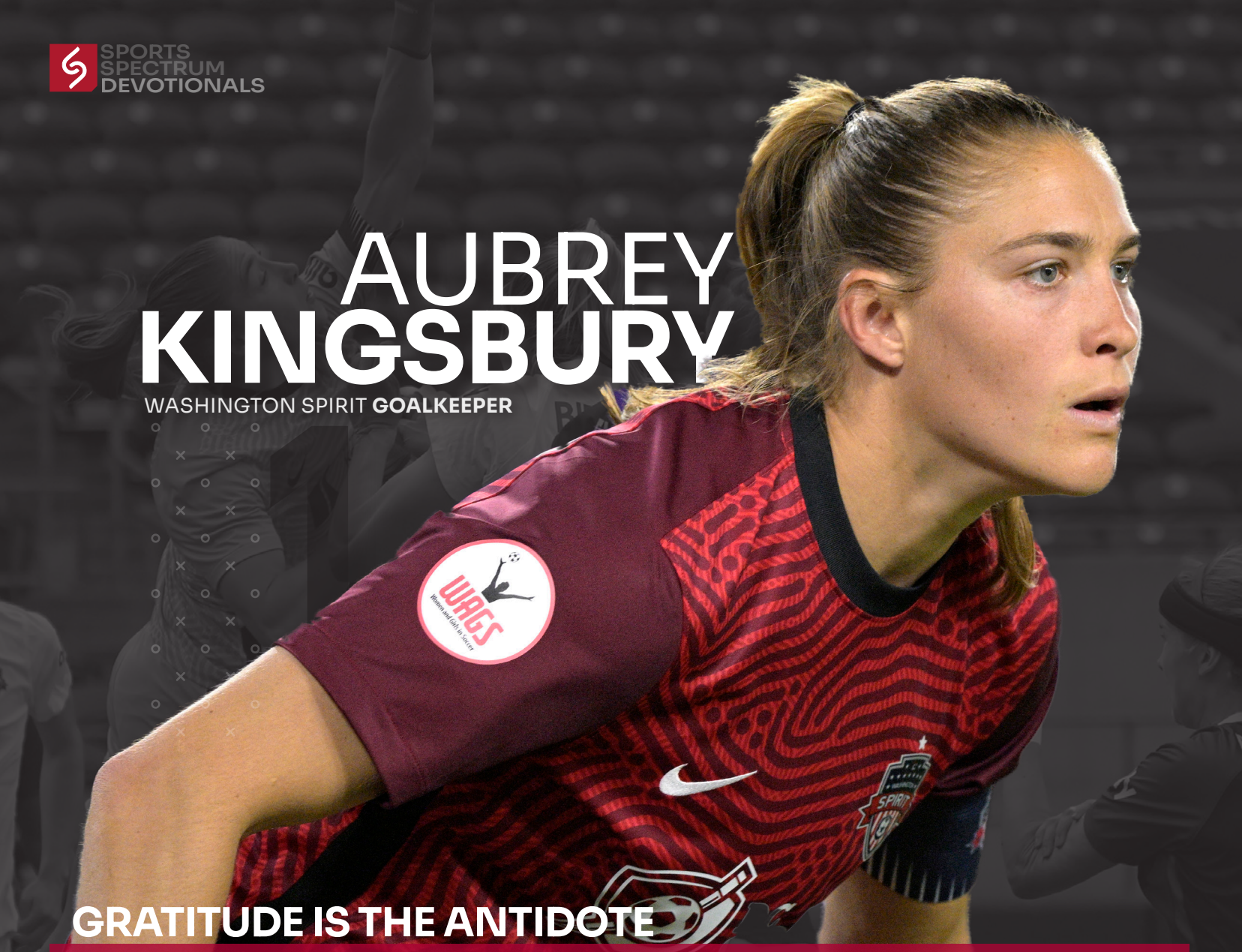
There had to be no disciple who felt less equipped than Peter. A fisherman by trade with explosive emotions, who historians believe was illiterate, he must have felt incredibly overwhelmed when Jesus declared that his testimony would be a foundation the Church would be built on. Later on in his life, Peter (with the help of a traveling companion named Mark) shared all he experienced with Jesus in two letters that were distributed (1 and 2 Peter).

The second letter attributed to him seems to start out with words that come from a man who finally realized he was only able to live the life and have the ministry he did because of God's power. "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Remember: God doesn't call people who are qualified. He calls people who are available, and He qualifies them as they walk in their individual callings.

AUBREY KINGSBURY

WASHINGTON SPIRIT **GOALKEEPER**



GRATITUDE IS THE ANTIDOTE

To go from winning a NWSL championship in 2021 to not even making the playoffs in 2022 was really disappointing. I expected a lot more of myself and our team. As one of the team captains, I feel a lot of responsibility for our results and constantly look at what I can do to help the team win. As a competitor, I can live with losing to better teams, but this year was particularly frustrating because we did have the pieces. There were definitely injuries and other extenuating circumstances, but we pretty much returned a championship-winning team.

Still, I trust that the Lord used our season in ways we may not yet see. I know there was a purpose for it all and He was still working in me and through our team. God doesn't care about the results on the field. It matters much more to Him how I'm treating my teammates, the support staff, the people who don't get the praise and the glory on the field.

In tough or disappointing times like this past year, I have to remind myself that sport is my ministry. I'm only here by the grace of God, and honestly I'm in so much awe and wonder that I'm still playing. Some people have dreams of being a pro athlete, but that wasn't me. I wanted to travel the world and maybe play for a year. But here I am almost eight years later and I've won a championship, I've been on the national team, and I would say the game has put me in a position of influence, not only on my team but in the league.

Gratitude is my antidote for tough times, and sometimes I need to refocus on why I'm here and what my purpose is. That's to be a light to my teammates and to glorify God in every way I can where I'm at. I have a platform to advance His Kingdom in a lot of different ways. As Christians, our hope is not in anything in this world. We have an eternal hope, like the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 (ESV): "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

We may have a tough season or I may get sad about not being called up to the national team — and I don't have to deny those feelings; emotion is real and we can still desire things — but ultimately I'm not going to lose hope. Whatever we're experiencing, it's part of the story God is writing in our lives. If we trust that He is the ultimate and perfect Author, then everything is ultimately for our good and His glory.

That perspective helps me get up in the morning with a smile on my face and keep doing the best I can regardless of how disappointed I may be. Even when we're sad or have different plans in mind about what life should look like, we can still trust in the Lord.

AP Photo/Phelan M. Ebenhack Ted S. Warren

WRITTEN BY
FLECEIA COMEAUX
HOUSTON DASH CHAPLAIN

LEAN IN & LEAN ON

[Open with Matthew 11:28-30]

When we lean on something, we trust that thing will hold us up. Have you ever leaned on a tree or a wall? Did you push against the tree before you leaned on it, or push against the wall to make sure it wouldn't move? No, because you trusted they would hold you up.

All throughout Scripture, there are several incidents in which people had to lean on or put their full weight on God. Putting your full weight on anything can be scary, but God promises in 1 Peter 5:7 that you can "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

The Father is hoping we will trust Him to hold us up and put our full weight upon Him. Jesus says it this way in Matthew 11:28-30 (MSG): "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of my grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

In order to trust, rely and depend on a holy God, we must learn to put our full weight upon Him.

TRUST YOUR TRAINING

[Open with 1 Timothy 4:7-8]

As I think about "training to be Godly" in today's passage, it truly explains how I came through a difficult time in my life. I was a high school junior when I tore my ACL, and my doctor told me I would never play another sport. I only had two choices after hearing that news: cry over the devastation or fall back on my training.

I chose the latter. I turned to the one true God and what His Word said about me. I prayed, declared and worked, trusting that my efforts would not be in vain. As I labored through rehab, my doctor became a believer as he watched me progress and defy his initial odds. He went from saying I would never play again to saying I'll play in nine months, then to settling on, "You'll be back on the court in five months."

During that time I spoke a simple declaration over my life: "I believe in God and He lives in me. He can do anything so I can do anything." In my senior year, I watched the God of the universe take my childlike faith and do the improbable through me. But none of that would have happened if I had not fallen back on training.

Are you training yourself in the Word of God, the character of God and through Godliness developed in prayer? When we fall back on our Godly training, He does the rest.

IT'S A MATTER OF TRUST

[Open with Proverbs 3:5-6]

I was the youngest of three kids and the only girl. My two older brothers had one job: Teach me everything I didn't know or could not do. They spent hours showing me how to throw a spiral, shoot a basketball or catch a baseball, and no matter the task, they were always up for the job.

One big thing they taught me was how to ride a bike — my powder blue "Sky Queen" with the white banana seat. With this, they showed greater patience and more grace for my learning curve, and previous experience told me I could trust them. There was always one brother behind me holding onto the bike and the other on the side giving direction. I don't remember ever looking back, only focusing on the landscape in front and the steady voices behind.

Isn't that what God does with us? He leads us through new circumstances with a firm hand and constant presence. In Proverbs 3:5-6, Solomon paints a beautiful picture: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

My brothers were awesome with things like those bike lessons, but my trust in them had been established well before. I knew they would hold on until I got the hang of it, and I knew they would be behind me until I could pedal on my own. I am so thankful our God does the exact same thing for us. When it is all said and done, it's really just a matter of trust.

GOD IS ABLE

[Open with Daniel 3:16-18]

When I was coaching, I always felt a tug on my character to do it any way but God's way. My quiet demeanor and level temper would sometimes infuriate those around me. Now, don't mistake my meekness for weakness. I was passionate on the sideline but I always knew my boundaries.

Many people would tell me, "You can't love on them and be stern. You can't be concerned with everything about them and stay objective." I even had parents tell me I should cuss my players out to get them to respond when they weren't playing well. But I was determined to hold onto my sideline witness and remember the God-ordained mission I had on that campus.

In Daniel 3:16-18, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego also made a bold statement in and about their God. They replied to the culture of the day by saying, "We will not bow down to you or your idols. We are going to continue to do things God's way." When pressured by the king to bow down or else, they declared, "The God we serve is able to deliver us."

For 11 years on the sideline, I made a commitment to not bow down to the culture, the expectations of others, or to anything set up against the things of God. Like those three men, I made bold statements with my life because I knew the God I served was able. He is able to sustain me, protect me and keep me from falling. What bold declarations will you make with your life this year?

JORDAN MATTHEWS

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS **TIGHT END**

INVEST IN THE ETERNAL

As a believer in an NFL locker room, I'm always thinking, "OK, how am I representing the Gospel?" I am intentional in how I display the Gospel to these men. That's the ultimate reason why I'm here. But I also think, "How am I performing on the field?" We're all competitors. We all want to play to the best of our abilities and win.

A very hard thing about being a believer in a locker room is everybody wants to be, say, Demario Davis or Steph Curry. A lot of times, we link connection with God to ability and success. If somebody is performing very, very well, we then assume, "Oh, they must have a closer connection with the Most High than I do." As a believer, you love to see when a Demario Davis is unapologetically open about his relationship with God and also balling on the field. Men want to see other men conquer things they wish they could.

When you're not succeeding, though, it's really hard because now you can feel like, "Am I just another team chaplain? I'm not balling right now." And so you struggle with thoughts like, "OK, is what I'm saying even resonating with these guys?" Because I may be there giving them truth, giving them love, displaying the Gospel to them every single day, but then they go out on the field and see a guy living a totally different way than what God's Word teaches, and he is out there being an All-Pro.

Maybe you see this in your school or work or community — people living contrary to what the Bible teaches but living very successful lives, at least by the world's standards. Maybe you're trying to reach them with the Good News, but you don't know if what you're saying is having any impact.

We just have to keep planting seeds. You may not see that spiritual growth you're trying to manifest, but you don't know what's growing underneath the surface. Throughout my time in the NFL, I've seen seeds that believers planted begin to bloom three years after a guy's done playing. We've got to be patient, continue to plant seeds, and though it may not look like anything's happening now, the harvest is going to be reaped in due time.

A lot of people attaining things you want may find that those things actually put them in slippery situations. Things of this world won't last. But the foundation you're building your life on is equipped to last if it's built on Christ.

Only God knows how long my time in the NFL will be, and it will end at some point. Somebody new is going to come in and take over the jersey I have now, and move into the locker I'm in now. So it only makes sense to invest in the eternal as opposed to the external.

AP Photo/Scot Tucker Charlie Riedel

WRITTEN BY
IKKI SOMA
HOUSTON ROCKETS CHAPLAIN

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

[Open with John 13:34-35]

I have a good friend who, like me, was raised in California but now lives in Texas. He is a committed San Francisco 49ers fan. He has a room in his house painted in scarlet, gold and white, with all types of 49ers memorabilia on the walls. He regularly wears 49ers shirts, hats and jackets. He never misses a game. You can clearly see he is a passionate follower of the 49ers because there is ample evidence.

What is the evidence that we are passionate followers of Jesus Christ? Jesus tells us in John 13:34-35 that the evidence is our love for one another. We find the command to "love one another" more than 16 times in the Bible. There are 59 "one anothers" in the Bible and our love for one another is the foundational one.

We encourage people because we love them. We spur people on because we love them. We pray for people because we love them. To love means to sacrificially and unconditionally seek God's best for the object of our love. When we love like this, people will recognize we are followers of Jesus Christ.

Loving one another can look like helping someone with their schoolwork, buying someone lunch, or sitting and listening to someone who has had a rough week. Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is the ultimate picture of love. Whom can you love today? And what can you do to demonstrate that love?

ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

[Open with 1 Thessalonians 5:11]

Every summer during our anniversary weekend, my home church, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, holds a 5K race. In my third year of seminary, I won the race. The next year, the pressure was on me as the defending champion. The gun went off and we started running up Camp Wisdom Road.

At the midpoint of the race, I found myself in fourth place. Due to a busier schedule that year, I had not trained very much and had also gained some weight since the previous race. I was sweating profusely and my legs felt very heavy. Then, out of the corner of my eye, an SUV began pulling up alongside me. The passenger window rolled down and a familiar voice began calling out my name and encouraging me. It was Dr. Tony Evans. With his encouragement, I didn't quit — and as a matter of fact, I caught the third-place runner ahead of me and finished in third.

The Christians in Thessalonica were very discouraged. They experienced persecution because of their Christian faith. They lost jobs. They were imprisoned. Some were martyred. So Paul tells them to encourage one another in 1 Thessalonians 5:11. The word "encourage" means to pull up alongside and call out — like Dr. Evans pulling up alongside me and telling me to keep going. Like a cheerleader or coach on the sidelines who pushes you.

Discouragement is rampant in our world. Do you know someone who is discouraged? How can you encourage them today?

SPUR ONE ANOTHER

[Open with Hebrews 10:24]

I was on a lengthy phone call with my good friend, Sam Johnson, the team chaplain for the San Antonio Spurs. Our wives were enjoying brunch together, so we decided to catch up over the phone. He asked me a question about what I do to prepare sermons, and after I gave him an answer, he challenged me to take my sermon preparation up a notch. He was spurring me on.

Now, I find it coincidental that the logo for the San Antonio Spurs is an actual spur and that Sam is a team chaplain for them. A spur is on the end of a cowboy boot and is used to get a horse to start moving. That word "spur" can mean to provoke or stimulate. That's why the writer of Hebrews uses the word "spur" in Hebrews 10:24. We are to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

Picture some sharp spurs digging into the belly of a horse and provoking it to start galloping. That is what we are to do as the family of God — we are to spur one another.

And that's what Sam was doing with me. He wants me to be the best preacher I can be, he wants me to maximize the abilities God has given me, so he spurs me on. And because Sam is my brother in Christ, I spur him on as well. Whom do you need to spur on toward love and good deeds?

PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

[Open with James 5:16]

As a team chaplain for the Houston Rockets, I've met many well-known athletes, entertainers and leaders. I've attended some of the Rockets' biggest playoff games. Because I'm an NBA chaplain, I've been invited to speak at men's conferences, pro and college football chapels, and churches. I've even had the privilege of officiating the wedding of an NBA player and his wife.

Being an NBA team chaplain has many perks, but perhaps the biggest benefit of the role is being a part of the NBA chaplain brotherhood. Why is that a perk? Because we pray for one another.

Chaplains have asked for prayer for effective ministry and we pray for them. Chaplains have lost loved ones and we pray for them. About a year ago, I was going through a very difficult season in ministry. During that time, I was getting calls, text messages and emails from other NBA chaplains letting me know they were praying for me. It was so encouraging to know my chaplain brothers were calling out to God for me.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, writes to Christians who are going through trials and troubles. Some of these Christians have hurt and offended one another. So in James 5:16, he tells them to confess how they've sinned against one another, and then he says they are to pray for one another.

We can all demonstrate we are a part of the family of God by praying for one another. Whom can you pray for today?

MATTHEW BOYD

DETROIT TIGERS **PITCHER**

WHAT GOD CALLS US

The past year has been interesting. I had surgery on my throwing arm toward the end of 2021, left Detroit after more than six seasons to sign with San Francisco as a free agent, spent much of 2022 rehabbing, was traded to Seattle before I could even make an appearance with the Giants, made 10 appearances as a Mariner (plus one in the playoffs), then became a free agent again, and now I'm back in Detroit. It's been a whirlwind, but I'm excited for this season.

It was tough being away from the game most of last season. I was still at the field every day and working, but when you have your occupation essentially taken away, it can leave you floundering. We all have identities that are worldly, and they aren't necessarily bad unless one becomes your only identity. One thing that was paramount through all my uncertainty was, "What's my identity?" And more specifically, "What does God tell me my identity is?"

I am a fearless, peaceful competitor. I go out and I compete in what I do. The medium for that is mostly baseball right now, but I compete in everything else I do too, whether it's in training or in how God is leading me to live. That's what He calls me to do. So when all I have to do is rehab and train in preparation for 9-10 months down the road, what is my identity in that?

Well, I felt God show me how to live that out. I could compete in my rehab. I could compete, as funny as it sounds, with my kids and being a parent; I could compete to be present and fully there with more time at home. I could compete to make my marriage thrive, and not compete against her.

We all need to know what God calls us. Anything we do in life is going to end up being built on sand unless we truly know what God calls us to. Figuring that out may start with understanding what He's *not* calling us to. He's not calling us to be weak or anxious. So if we're living out a lot of decisions with anxiety, that's not coming from Him. That's not a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

We need to discover the promises and truth God has spoken over our lives. If the identity God has given you is in alignment with how you're living, then I think you will thrive. We discover that alignment through prayer and asking God, "What do You call me? How am I called to live?" In quiet times with the Lord and hearing His voice, ask Him, "What does that look like? How is that supposed to be, Lord?"

We need to have conversations with our Heavenly Father like we would our earthly father. In those He can start to reveal more to us. I'm not the best at it; I'm working every day. But I try my best to sit back and just ask, "What do You want? What do You expect of me today, Lord? What do You want me to know?" The more we ask, the more He'll make it clear to us.

AP Photo/Scot Tucker Charlie Riedel

WRITTEN BY
JEFF TOTTEN
DETROIT TIGERS CHAPLAIN

UNITY — PRAY FOR IT

[Open with John 17]

Unity is one of those team intangibles that's highly treasured but not easily found. Michael Jordan is quoted as saying, "Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships." Long before Jordan spoke these words, Jesus declared the importance of unity in John 17. In fact, just hours before going to the cross, Jesus prayed that His disciples and all future followers would demonstrate unity (John 17:11, 21, 22).

Beyond sports, unity's importance is magnified in other areas of life: marriage, church, communities, countries, families, ministries, etc. Its necessity is amplified by the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:25: "Every city or household divided against itself will not stand."

The 1979 World Series was won by the Pittsburgh Pirates. However, on June 1 of that season, they were six games back and in fourth place in their division. During a rain delay that day at Three Rivers Stadium, the No. 4 song on the Billboard charts, "We Are Family," blared over the sound system. Sitting in the dugout was outfielder and team leader Willie Stargell. Knowing his team needed a rally cry, Stargell called the press box and declared that this song was "the official theme song of the 1979 Pirates." Within minutes, that was posted on the stadium scoreboard. The song was played at every home game for the remainder of the season, reminding the team of the unity they were pursuing together.

Praying for unity, as Jesus did, reminds us to pursue it together.

UNITY — PORTRAY IT

[Open with Psalm 133]

Unity flows from the top down. This is the message of the two images given in Psalm 133 (oil running down the beard and dew flowing down from Mount Hermon). Leadership sets the tone for unity on a team, in a church, for a country, etc. Leaders build unity when they serve others instead of feeling entitled to have others serve them.

This wasn't taking place in Israel as recorded in 1 Kings 12:1-20 (930 BC). King Solomon died following a 40-year reign of great prosperity. His son, Rehoboam, was positioned to take over as king. The people promised their allegiance if Rehoboam would just lighten up some of the harsh policies from his father. Rehoboam's reply was, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier." Translation: "You are here to serve me, I'm not here to serve you." The result was the national disunity of a civil war.

Leaders build unity when they serve and sacrifice for those considered the least among them. An article in a recent edition of Golf Digest records the impressions of caddies on the newly formed LIV Golf Tour. Several described their experiences as being served on one tour and feeling like they were not cared for on the other tour. One caddie recounted, "Everywhere I go, someone is asking, 'How can we help you?' or 'What can we do better?'" He concluded by saying, "To be seen means … a lot."

Leaders build unity when they see and serve others.

UNITY — PRIORITIZE IT

[Open with Philippians 2:1-11]

Unity doesn't just happen, it is intentional. It begins with a mindset that prioritizes and pursues it. As taught in Philippians 2:1-11, the example to follow is Jesus. It begins by thinking like He did about ourselves and others. The humility of Jesus is seen in phrases like "made himself nothing," "taking the very nature of a servant" and "becoming obedient."

Unity is built around the actions of the humble. The mindset of the Christian is that we are together and unified in Christ regardless of differences in nationality, economics, background, race, etc.

In his book, "The Power of an Encouraging Word," author Ken Sutterfield relates a story from the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. Jesse Owens of the U.S. was the world record holder in the long jump. Yet in his first two qualifying jumps, he fouled by taking off from several inches past the jumping board. He was one mistake away from being eliminated. Owens was aware of the Nazi desire to prove Aryan superiority, especially over people of color. Tensions were high and nerves had gotten to Owens.

Then something remarkable happened. In full view of the crowd, Owens' German competitor, Luz Long, introduced himself to Jesse. Long suggested Owens make a mark a few inches short of the board in order to not foul. With this technical assistance from his "foe," Owens easily qualified and went on to win the gold medal in this and three other events. Owens never saw Long again. He was killed in World War II. Yet years later, Owens would speak of their "24-carat friendship."

A mindset and simple action brought unity for these two men, despite their many differences.

UNITY — PRESERVE IT

[Open with Hebrews 10:19-25]

The words "let us" appear three times in Hebrews 10:19-25. The writer is reminding us that the Christian life is not an individual activity but a team endeavor. We need one another. We are not designed to follow Jesus alone. There are things we need to do to maintain our unity in Christ.

In verse 22, we are called to "draw near to God" in a unified manner. We are to PRAY together. We are to praise God with one another. We are to celebrate and rejoice together in our faith. Much like a team carrying a coach on its shoulders after a landmark victory, Christians are to be united in lifting up Jesus.

Next, in verse 23, we are challenged to "hold unswervingly" to our hope. We are to POSSESS our faith. Jesus should be Lord over everything, everywhere and all the time. There should be no area of a believer's life that Jesus does not touch.

Finally, in verses 24-25, we are instructed to "spur one another on." We are to PROVOKE, in a positive sense, one another in following Christ. Perhaps a word that better fits the mindset of an athlete is "challenge." As Christians "meet together," we are to encourage one another to grow in Christ and push one another toward a deeper relationship with Him.

NICOLE RANGEL-MENDES

PROFESSIONAL SOFTBALL PLAYER

FIRM FAITH

I'm learning a lot about patience and timing, and being OK with the season I'm in. A season of activity is just as good as a season of stillness, so whichever I'm in, I need to be OK with it because God placed me there.

In the summers I play professional softball, but outside of that I want to do broadcasting — radio, TV, either one. I was able to call a lot of softball games last season, and then I played professionally. It was a really cool, fruitful, busy season, and felt so satisfying. But in the offseason, while gearing up for the next softball season, I have to really put my head down and trust.

There aren't a ton of opportunities or leagues for pro softball, and broadcasting is a tough industry to break into. But these avenues are what I feel like God has called me toward. I'm not really sure how it's going to go, but I trust this is where God wants to lead me. Just because I'm not comfortable doing new things or I'm not super experienced, that doesn't mean I can't do them or they're not going to happen. I just need to trust that God's going to make them happen, and then work with what I've been given.

It can be easy to celebrate in the highs — when things are busy and good — and despair in the lows — when things are slow and frustrating — but we can stay steady if our faith is firm in the foundation of who God is. Whatever season we're in, God has a reason for it and we need to remain faithful. We need to always be preparing our foundation and building up our "storehouses" so that during seasons of either activity or stillness, our foundation is solid. We'll be able to draw on our faith and the reserves we've built up.

To do that, I get up and do my Bible study every morning. If I don't do it right away, it's really easy to get distracted and do other things. But getting in the Word early helps set the tone for my day. Sometimes it's hard and my mind starts wandering to the things on my to-do list. But we really have to set this time aside and be intentional about giving it to God. I heard this helpful tip a long time ago: Keep an empty notebook next to you as you study, so if something else pops into your head that you need to remember, just write it down. Then you know you won't forget, so you won't constantly think about it. That helps me focus and stay in tune with God, so I can hear what He's trying to tell me.

Lately, Psalm 33:18 has resonated with me: "But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love." Wherever I go, I want the Lord's eyes to be on me. I'm constantly trying to strengthen my hope in His unfailing love and perfect plans He has for my life.

Photos courtesy of Nicole Rangel-Mendes

WRITTEN BY
STEVE HAWTHORNE
NEW YORK RED BULLS CHAPLAIN

A NEW SEASON

[Open with Psalm 1]

Spring is a time when we're filled with hope. In many places, the thaw of spring leads people into more activity, healthier outlooks and new expectant attitudes. As the new shoots of grass and flowers start to show, there is all kinds of potential for a new season of life.

In sports, a new season means players and fans have belief that this could be their team's year. To win it all, however, the players need to withstand the storms of the season. They'll need to be strong to endure through grueling trials. They'll have to remain level-headed in victory and not be discouraged in defeat. Hope is not enough to achieve a winning season. It takes health and intentional actions to actually see hope turn into reality.

In this upcoming season, are you prepared for the storms? Because we can be sure the wind will blow and the rains will pour. Thankfully, we have this great counsel from God's Word: "Blessed is the one … whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers" (Psalm 1:1-3).

Our hope is victory and peace in Jesus, but that doesn't come automatically just because you're a Christian. It comes from being rooted and established — prepared for the upcoming season in all its beauty and trials. Are you ready for a new season?

IDENTIFYING THE WEEDS

[Open with Psalm 139:23-24]

If you do any sort of yard work, have you ever noticed the things you don't want to grow tend to do so easily and spread quickly? And the things you actually do want to grow are tougher to keep healthy?

Illustrations such as these help us understand our own hearts. The apostle Paul dealt with the problem of weeds, just as we do. He too was frustrated by the pattern of things dying that he wanted to grow, and things growing that he wanted to die. "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18-19). It's so easy for sin to grow!

This is why we all need teammates looking out for us, and coaches who can help us see what we can't. We think we have an accurate view, but when it comes to our own garden, we need others to help us tend to it. Thankfully, we have the best help available in the Source of all life. When we can't even sort our own hearts, we can turn to Him with this prayer from Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Are you allowing God and others to help you identify weeds?

GOOD DEFENSE

[Open with Psalm 119:9-11]

No team can do well without guarding well. "Defense wins championships," as the famous coach Bear Bryant once said. Without a solid defense, no amount of offense really matters.

We need walls to protect places that really matter, and no places matter more than our hearts and minds. If we don't intentionally invest in defensive strategies to protect ourselves, we are left open to predators and unwelcome forces. This is why we have clear instruction from Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

Just like on a field, good defense doesn't naturally occur. It takes a plan and good execution to ensure it's effective. Our defensive plan comes straight from our Heavenly Coach. "How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9-11). The goalkeeper of your heart is the Word of God. When you hide Scripture in your heart through regular devotions (like this one), Bible study, sitting under solid preaching, and a healthy Biblical community, you're intentionally investing in a defensive strategy to keep you from sin.

Good teams make adjustments when their defense isn't working. How is yours holding up? Are you guarded from the enemy? If you're vulnerable, make some changes to your strategy.

NEW LIFE REQUIRES DEATH

[Open with John 12:24]

In sports, players come and go. To progress as a team, you need to say "hello" to new players and "good bye" to others. Many times, a player needs a different environment that's better for his/her development. In life, to see a person or family flourish, they may have to relocate to a new state or city. Saying goodbye is tough, but not making changes could stunt the growth of a person, family or team.

God wants to produce new life in you in the season ahead. But to see new life form, something else usually needs to be put to death. Jesus said it like this: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24).

For the kind of growth you truly long for, certain things in your mind, heart and life need to die. To see new life, we all have certain habits, passions, behaviors and ways of thinking that should die. Truly, our whole "old self" must be put to death in Christ in order to be raised in Him.

When Jesus spoke of His own coming death, His followers tried to dissuade Him. But Jesus knew that for all of us to have the chance of life, He needed to die. As we start a new season, what part of you needs to die so you might walk with even more life?

TRANSFORMED

BY JADE McCARTHY

***Jade McCarthy** is the host of Sports Spectrum's "Transformed" podcast. She is a speaker and writer who is passionate about the transformative points in our lives and the journey God calls each of us to embark upon. Jade is an Emmy Award-winning 20-year veteran of the television industry who hosted ESPN's flagship show, "SportsCenter," and reported features for "Sunday NFL Countdown." Jade and her husband, Gordy, live in the Northeast with their four children.*

To listen to the "Transformed" podcast, visit SportsSpectrum.com

THE SWEET SPOT

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." – Joel 2:28

The satisfying thwack when you swing the club just right. The pop of a fastball in the center of a catcher's mitt. The spinning spiral. The perfectly placed pass. When the ball strikes the bat or racquet in just the right spot.

The sweet spot.

We know the way it feels when we find it. We know the way we live when we're in it. Not easy, but with ease. Not satisfied, but satisfying. Not forceable, but findable.

We seek the sweet spot because it is a feeling of bliss. It is beautiful in its simplicity — the moment, the feeling, the experience.

The sweet spot bridges a moment in a swing or a pass or a catch to the moments when we swing, throw or grab in life. When we take a swing at something — new or otherwise — and we do it with goodness in our heart, it too feels blissful. When we pass on goodness to someone else, it too feels joyful. When we are a fortunate recipient who catches the sweet toss from someone, it too feels blessed.

I like to think of the sweet spot as fully living in God's love. Those moments have a purity that is indescribable; mere words will never capture God's love. It is best found in action. His Word is living — Jesus lived it out for you, for me, for every one of us. God loves us with the perfection we feel in the sweet spot.

What if we strive for that sweetness in everyday moments of our everyday lives? What if we surrender to the recognition that we cannot force the sweet spot? What if we act with intentionality and commitment to live out God's love? What if we recognize that we will fail again and again, and instead of allowing those failures to distract us with shame, we greet them with grace, so we can focus on our next swing, pass or catch?

It is not unlike any athlete on any field of play. "Shake it off" are the words I call to my kids when they miss. We hear that closers in baseball must have a short memory. We know when a quarterback tosses an interception that he must move on to the next play. An effective quarterback can't let what happened then determine what happens next. Is there a time for study to help prevent the same mistake from reoccurring? Yes. It is intentional, efficient and needed. The training must trump the turnover.

> "God has put within each of us a particular dream that He wants us to pursue for the greatness of who He wants us to be."

The field of life is no different. The sweet spot requires that we fill our mind with goodness so it cannot be overpowered by the shortcomings that will come our way. And shortcomings are guaranteed. Self-reflection is required to keep the errors of a past season from carrying into the one we are presently in. Intentional, efficient, needed.

Similarly, we cannot allow results to define our sweet spot. A tennis player may hit the ball just right and it sails an inch past the baseline. A pitcher may wind up and deliver it squarely into the catcher's mitt only to have it called a ball. A quarterback may throw the perfect pass to find his receiver ran the wrong route. The sweet spot is process-oriented, not results-driven. That tennis player will hit the line, that pitcher will wind up and deliver a strike, and that quarterback will throw another pass that finds a receiver in stride.

Think of God as the quarterback and each of us as receivers. He never stops throwing passes. But like a quarterback on a field, the more the receivers lean in, listen and execute, the greater the trust. The more we execute His plan the more He incorporates us into His playbook.

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." — Joel 2:28

Think of the dreams that God has put on your heart. Think of the moments in your life when what you are doing feels like you are living in — and living out — His love. The Lord is here encouraging you, encouraging me, participating in each of our stories for the greater story He is writing. God has put within each of us a particular dream that He wants us to pursue for the greatness of who He is and who He wants us to be.

The sweet spot.

Seek it. Surrender to it. Share it.

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VICTORY BEYOND COMPETITION

BY REZA ZADEH

Reza Zadeh *serves with Athletes in Action, directs AIA's Ultimate Training Camp, and is the Denver Broncos team chaplain. He also works with Pro Athletes Outreach as the pro athlete liaison, connecting and resourcing team chaplains across the country. Reza converted from Islam to Christianity as a Colorado State football player, and now enjoys training athletes to be athletic disciples who make athletic disciples. Reza, his wife Allyson and their three children live in Colorado.*

EVERYONE NEEDS A NATHAN

"Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'... Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" – 2 Samuel 12:7

King David is remembered as the greatest physical king God's people have ever served. The nation of Israel expanded greatly under his rule and God's favor was all over the nation when he was ruler. People seemed pleased at the way David ruled, especially after the debacle that was Saul's administration.

However, just because David was a good king doesn't mean he did everything perfectly. There were mistakes along the way, and none was as public or shameful as his affair with Bathsheba, and the subsequent assassination of her husband, Uriah, to cover up their relationship.

Like many of us, David had some skeletons in his closet. He thought no one would find out about the shameful things he had done, but his sin was too public and obvious to be ignored. His attendants must have known what he did and word must have spread around the streets about his illicit affair and quick marriage to the widow Bathsheba. But no one dared say anything — no one except the prophet Nathan.

Nathan and David were more than friends. They were united in leadership over God's people and worked closely together. Nathan loved David and believed in his leadership, so much so that Nathan knew he had to say something to David; there was too much at stake.

In the Bible, 2 Samuel 12 records this conversation between the prophet and the king. Nathan begins by telling David a story about a powerful man who took advantage of another, which struck something in David's heart. He burned with anger and declared that the man who did this must be punished.

Then came the fateful words of the prophet to David: "You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. … Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:7, 9).

> "We all need people who are invested in us and our growth, not in simply making us feel good about ourselves."

Can you imagine how David's heart must have sunk in that moment? He thought he had covered up his wrongdoing, and that his position as king would protect him from being confronted. But Nathan was too righteous and cared for David too much to allow him to stay in his sin. Nathan confronted David, led him to repent, and reminded him of God's faithfulness.

Here's the truth for us from this Biblical account: Everyone needs a Nathan.

Nathan actually acted out of love more than all the attendants and officials who turned a blind eye to David's sinful actions. You and I need people in our lives who care for us enough to speak plainly to us and help us see things we seemingly ignore. For Nathan, his care and concern for David was greater than what the king could do to Nathan for challenging his integrity.

The question for you and me is this: Do we have these kinds of people in our lives? If we are going to live for God's Kingdom instead of our own kingdoms, then we must surround ourselves with people who are committed to challenging us, even when it is difficult.

Here are four principles from this story that remind us of what we need in our lives:

1. **We all need friends we can trust.**
2. **We all need friends who will speak truth to us.**
3. **We all need friends who trust us.**
4. **We all need friends who will be committed to righteousness with us.**

It can be painful to have people point out your blind spots or single out your sin, but the uncomfortableness of these conversations is nothing compared to the weight of the consequences we will have to suffer if we continue down a dark path paved with sin. The company you keep will shape your character. The old phrase, "Show me your friends and I'll show you your life in 10 years," has never been more true.

We all need people who are invested in us and our growth, not in simply making us feel good about ourselves.

It is true that a relationship with Jesus is a personal relationship between you and Him, but it isn't a private relationship. We need others to publicly walk with us and challenge us when needed.

YOU CAN KNOW CHRIST PERSO

OUR PROBLEM, GOD'S SOLUTION

By Randy Alcorn

STEP 01

"God created mankind in his own image … God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." Genesis 1:27, 31

God made human beings with personal and relational qualities like His own (Genesis 1:26) and desired to have a delightful relationship with them. But something went terribly wrong. When Adam and Eve chose to follow Satan's advice in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), sin poisoned the world and now we are all born with the desire to do things our own way, not God's.

STEP 02

"For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23

Our sins against a good and holy God have distanced us from Him (Isaiah 59:2). God "cannot tolerate wrongdoing" (Habakkuk 1:13). Through sin we forfeit a relationship with God, and along with it our happiness. The result of all this is death. Spiritual death is separation from God in a very real place called hell. Physical death marks the end of our opportunity to enter into a relationship with God and avoid eternal condemnation (Hebrews 9:27).

STEP 03

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 6:23

There is absolutely nothing we can do to restore ourselves to God. He is holy, we are not. In fact, He says even our good deeds are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). But God loved us so much He sent us His Son Jesus, fully God and fully Man, to deliver us from death and give us life (John 3:16). "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Jesus went to the cross to pay the price for our sins. He did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. When Jesus died for us, He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The Greek word for "it is finished" was written across certificates of debt when they were canceled. It meant "paid in full." Jesus then rose from the grave, conquering sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

If these words reflect your heart and you would like to receive salvation through Jesus Christ, say this prayer to God. **It's as simple as A-B-C: Admit, Believe, Confess.**

NALLY

"The best news ever is that we can be made right with God, not through doing a million good works and hoping they outweigh our bad ones, but by simply accepting a free gift! God's love for us is so great that His Son, Jesus, died the death that we deserved, to pay the penalty for our sin and selfishness. His death and resurrection, and our faith in Him, cleanses us of our sin and restores us into a right relationship with the Almighty Creator of the universe!" — Nick Ahmed, Arizona Diamondbacks

STEP 04

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast."
Ephesians 2:8-9

God's greatest gift is a restored relationship with Himself, delivering us from hell and granting us entry into Heaven (John 3:36). This gift depends not on our merit but solely on Christ's work of grace for us on the cross (Titus 3:5). He is the one and only way to God. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

STEP 05

"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

To be right with God, we must admit our sinful hearts and actions, and ask for God's forgiveness. If we do, He graciously promises full forgiveness: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Then we are to affirm to others that the resurrected Jesus is our Lord.

STEP 06

"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but he has crossed over from death to life." John 5:24

The life we long for is freely offered to us in Christ. We can believe His promise and call on Him to save us, humbly accepting His gift of eternal life: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). God's Holy Spirit indwells us and helps us obey Him (2 Timothy 1:14).

"Dear God, I ADMIT that I'm a sinner and the penalty of my sin is death. I BELIEVE that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that He died and rose from the dead for my sin. And I CONFESS Jesus as my Savior. Please forgive me. I repent of my sin and surrender my life to You. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen." — Miles McPherson, senior pastor & former NFL player

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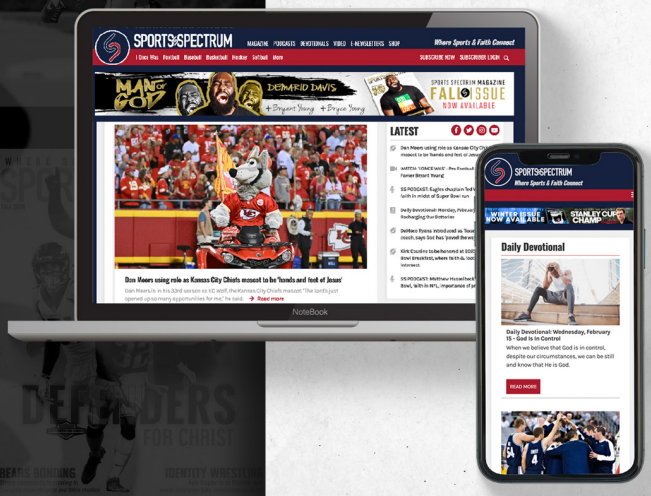

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